

Short Writings from Bulawayo II



Edited by Jane Morris

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Short Writings
from
Bulawayo
II

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Jane Morris

'amaBooks



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Everything is Gonna Be All Right

Mzana Mthimkhulu

For a man whose wife we had buried two hours earlier, Mpala was too energetic for my liking.

He emerged from the four-roomed house with the air of a conquering army general about to inspect his troops. The heavy trench coat from his police days did not seem to weigh him down. He quickly got down the three steps and started shaking hands with the mourners. Although I could not hear his words, I could tell that he was thanking the mourners for coming.

“Come on Majaha,” naka Zandile, my cousin-sister nudged me. The two of us were sitting on a bench by the gate. “Get up and meet your son-in-law half way.”

“I am now overall father of the extended family,” I reminded her. “So do not order me around.”

“As long as I am four years older than you I will order you around. Besides, with aunt naka Thandiwe now gone, I am the oldest surviving member of the Ndlovu family. I can order all of you around. Now, stand up and offer Mpala our family’s condolences.”

I gulped down what was left of my coke, stood up and walked towards Mpala.

Mpala’s broad clean-shaven face was calm. “Son-in-law,” I murmured as we shook hands, “our families have suffered a major loss.”

He winced, as though fresh arrows had pierced him. “How true, baba Ndlovu, how true. Your daughter was the best wife a man could ever wish for. I suppose it was the inevitable outcome of an impeccable upbringing.” I smiled to acknowledge the accolade.

Suddenly he covered his face with his hands and broke down in tears. He was at least a foot taller than me so my attempt to put my arm around his broad shoulders was not a success. I felt awkward trying to comfort a man who at fifty-five was ten years older than me.

“Hush, son-in-law,” I said softly. “Everything is gonna be all

right.”

“Do you think so?” Mpala asked, as he tried to wipe the tears from his eyes. His sad face pleaded for assurance. “Do you really think everything will be all right?”

“Oh yes,” I said, injecting in my voice a confidence I did not feel.

“If you think so, then it must be so,” Mpala smiled. In an instant he seemed reassured and happy. “Before you leave, our family would like to speak to yours on an important matter. How about you coming to see us in twenty minutes?”

“Sure,” I nodded. He turned round and walked back to the house.

I quickly gathered members of my extended family to prepare for the meeting. By default, I was now the family head. Our eldest brother had ten years earlier emigrated to the United Kingdom. The second oldest brother had been killed in a car accident three years back. Our fathers were now all late. So here I was, the guiding light of our family affairs.

The family members gathered in a semi circle with naka Zandile and myself facing them.

“I have no idea why the Mpalas want to meet us,” I told them, “but I think it is a good idea that we first...”

“I know what they want,” naka Zandile cut in. “They intend to ask for a ripe girl from the family to replace our aunt and be Mpala’s wife. Majaha, you must have noticed the way Mpala was delighted when you assured him that everything was going to be all right? This was because such an important assurance was coming from the most senior male member of the family.”

“But I was just repeating a line from a Bob Marley’s *No Woman No Cry*,” I protested. “I am in no position to wave some magical wand and solve Mpala’s problem.”

“Yet you went on to offer him a wife?” Siphwiwe, my twenty-four year old sister chided me. She was evidently enjoying her first involvement in an adults’ discussion. I clicked my tongue in annoyance. There was laughter at my unhappiness with the way the meeting was going.

“Look people,” I cut through the laughter. “You all know that I am against these backward tribal practices. Our aunt is gone and there will be no one in the family to replace her. I am, after all, a born again Christian. I will just tell the Mpalas – no deal, ours is a Christian family.”

“Huh,” naka Zandile snorted. “We may not be happy clappers who revel in all night prayer marathons, but we are all Christians here. Being a Christian does not give you a licence to contemptuously dismiss our African traditions.”

“Then I will not be part of the delegation to meet the Mpalas,” I said, folding my arms.

Siphiwe scowled. “Brother, you can not shirk your duties just like that,” she snapped her fingers.

“Aha,” I thundered, pointing a finger at Siphiwe. “I will offer you as aunt’s replacement. I am sure Mpala has you in mind for a wife.”

“Who?” Siphiwe exploded. “You know I have a steady boyfriend and, next month, his people are coming to ask you for my hand in marriage.”

“Tell him and his people that the meeting is off. I have ruled that you are now Mpala’s wife.”

“Be your age Majaha,” naka Zandile rebuked me. “Not even father, had he been alive, would have the authority to marry off anyone. Siphiwe will only marry a man of her choice. Get this straight, you only speak for the family, not dictate to it.”

“Tell him sister,” Siphiwe applauded. “In any case, I am only a year older than cousin Thandiwe. How then can I be her mother?”

“Okay,” I said, throwing up my arms in exasperation. “What are we going to say to the Mpalas?”

Naka Zandile took a deep breath. “It is now time we stopped skirting the yard like a goat and, instead, tell each other a few truths. We all know that aunt died of AIDS. We all know she got it from that good for nothing womanising husband of hers. So it is out of the question that we consider any one of our daughters to go and keep the fire burning at aunt’s house. The challenge before us is to say no to the Mpalas without saying so.” Avoiding looking at each other, we slowly

nodded our head taking in what naka Zandile had said.

For the next thirty minutes we deliberated and strategised with the seriousness of top executives whose company was facing a hostile take over. Once we had agreed on our position, I led my team to the house for the talks.

Flanked by naka Zandile and my cousin-brother, I faced the Mpalas. We listened to Mpala's elder brother shower more praises on our aunt. "She was a remarkable woman. Whatever wealth my brother has today, it is thanks to her hard work and business mind. My brother has over a hundred cattle at our rural home. As for goats and sheep, I don't talk about those. Here in town, he has a flourishing tuck-shop and a brimming bank account.

"Now, my brother is still young with hot blood surging through his veins. Our family has agreed that it would be an insult to your family if we let some strange woman just walk in to inherit all this wealth created by your daughter. Only a member of your family has such a right. So, baba Ndlovu, we ask you to send us another daughter to come and look after naka Thandiwe's husband and her property. We guarantee you that your daughter will live in more comfort than a mother well supported by her children in the United Kingdom. We will of course pay the full lobola for your daughter."

I cleared my throat to signal the start of my response. "In the middle of the pain we are going through, we are comforted by the fact that you think so highly of our aunt. We are particularly delighted that you want an encore from our family. This makes us feel that we are an integral part of the community. My family respects our people's tradition that a marital position can be inherited."

As I spoke, I saw the expression on Mpala's face change from gloom to relief, and then joy.

"However," I continued, "our family requests that we observe a period of mourning before acting. At least a year must pass before we start making arrangements for one of our daughters to inherit her aunt's position."

In a split second, Mpala's face was gloom. "I respect your

reverence for the dead,” he burst out, “but things are rapidly changing. You know how difficult it is to keep wealth intact. I need a responsible woman by my side...”

“I understand your concerns,” I said sympathetically, “but we are not going to risk incurring the wrath of aunt’s spirit. We must wait. As for a responsible woman, you have her in the form of your twenty-three year old daughter, Thandiwe. She has, after all, been virtually running the tuck-shop.”

Mpala was about to speak, but his brother raised his hand to silence him. “We will wait,” the brother announced with finality.

We shook hands all round to cement the agreement we had reached. Five minutes later we were on our way out.

“Now, child of my father,” I said to naka Zandile as I drove her home, “what are we going to say when Mpala pitches up a year from now demanding his wife?”

“We will use traditional methods to contact aunt’s spirit and she will instruct us to wait another year before replacing her.”

I frowned and glanced at her. “Surely you can’t know in advance what aunt’s spirit will say?”

“Why not? I am the oldest surviving member of the family. Aunt will speak through me.”

“Okay,” I said, “we may get away with it, but we can’t postpone confronting Mpala forever. What will we say a year later?”

“We will cross that bridge when we get there,” she replied looking straight ahead.

We never got to the bridge. After being in and out of hospital several times, Mpala died two weeks before the anniversary of his wife’s death. My sister Sipiwe and her husband were part of the team that ran around making preparations for the funeral. We buried him two days later. Though distraught, his daughter Thandiwe was there to ensure that everything went well.

It's His Who Wakes the Hare

Christopher Mlalazi

“You must be content with what you have in life,” Msindo was advising Qolo. They were standing under the barren mango tree in front of Emakhandeni bottle store, sharing a scud, and also on the look out for the police. “That way you will never be jealous like my father. What is that Qolo? Mh?” He rubbed his hands briskly together, one blood shot eye squinting at the open door of the bottle store.

Msindo was the undisputed township blasphemer, and he had the right face to go with such a vocation – as if it was his by birth. His face was comically rubbery and could assume any expression at the drop of a coin. His lips were loose, with the bottom one overhanging - as if always ready to drop a crazy truth should anybody who needed ‘telling’ cross his path.

It was 7.30 in the morning on a clear Tuesday, and now and then a few people could be seen passing by on their way to Luveve Road to commute to their various work places.

“True, true, true, my stshomi,” Qolo replied. He was Msindo’s protégé, but not yet fully qualified, because he still needed to work on his shyness, as Msindo often reminded him, which made him talk about people behind their backs, not direct to their faces. “If God says have this, don’t ask for more, remain poor like that and you will lead a very comfortable and worry free life.” He chortled briefly. “Look at Mabhiza.”

Mabhiza was a young man who was the envy of the whole neighbourhood. He was married to a beautiful young woman, had the biggest house in the township, drove an expensive car, and drank clear beer in hotels in town. The previous week there had been a big fight in his house. He had come home unexpectedly and caught his wife in bed with the man who sold home made tar polish in the neighbourhood.

Msindo neighed in laughter, Qolo brayed, and the two men slapped hands, tears in their eyes.

“This is the ghetto,” said Msindo between laughter. “If you eat rice

and chicken every day, and I eat delele, watch out papa!”

Qolo had short, diseased looking dreadlocks, a circular scar on his left cheek that resembled a bite mark, and a wide gap between his front teeth. He was dressed in a Hulk T-shirt, a pair of old jeans that looked as if they had been chewed by a donkey, and once white gumboots.

It was their first scud of the day, and their faces were still heavy from the previous night’s drinking. Qolo picked up the scud from the ground, drank from it, and passed it to Msindo. He wiped his mouth with his hand.

Msindo drank deeply, his pointed Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, the scud held in both hands with its bottom pointing up at the blue sky.

“Msindo!” Qolo exclaimed. “Hayi Ah!”

Msindo removed the scud from his mouth and squinted at Qolo, his brow puckered. His tongue flicked across his lower lip.

“What?” Msindo was dressed in tyre sandals and black overalls. An army hat with a torn top sat on his head, its front folded back.

“Let’s drink slowly, we have no money today,” Qolo cautioned him.

Msindo grinned, and placed the scud on the ground in front of them. “I nearly finished it. It’s fresh.” He smacked his lips and patted his sunken stomach.

“You were saying a person mustn’t be jealous like your father. What has Ncube done again?” Qolo asked, leaning against the trunk of the mango tree with his shoulder.

“Look at Justin’s mother,” Msindo clicked his tongue in disgust, pointing with a finger at a woman who was approaching in their direction. “What kind of dressing is that? Mh? A mother with five children?”

Justin’s mother was dressed in a black body suit and a tight black hipster that described the curves of her figure to the lump on her crotch.

“She works in a pharmacy in town, doesn’t she?” Qolo asked between his teeth as Justin’s mother drew closer to them, walking

unsteadily on yellow high-heeled shoes. “Maybe she is fighting for promotion at work – Argh! Her perfume!” He wrinkled his nose as a sickeningly sweet scent assailed his nostrils from the direction of Justin’s mother.

“How are you mama?” Msindo greeted her cheerfully when she got abreast of them, rubbing his hands together politely.

“Yebo,” Justin’s mother quickly replied without looking at him, her nose disdainfully held up. A bee buzzed furiously over her head, and she swatted it away with her hand.

“That bee is disrespectful,” Qolo said, a grin on his face. “It wants to bite you when you are so smart - how are the children mama?”

“They are fine,” Justin’s mother replied in a low forced voice from the side of her mouth, still walking forward.

Msindo bowed politely at her. “So don’t dress like a prostitute phela,” he told her. “You want to teach our children wrong things?”

“Your grandmother!” Justin’s mother promptly replied.

“My grandmother did not go for a carpet interview!” Msindo replied in a loud voice as Justin’s mother increased her wobbly pace and walked away from them. She ducked her head as the bee furiously buzzed around her head again.

“Sting her, bee!” Msindo called after her.

Qolo pointed at her ample posterior as it jiggled away and rubbed his hands together, his face twisted into a grimace.

Msindo neighed in laughter, Qolo brayed, and the two men slapped hands.

“Msindo!” Qolo suddenly pointed at the ground

Msindo quickly looked down, and both men dived. They scuffled in the dust, pushing each other, their fingers raking the ground, until a small cloud of dust engulfed them. When they eventually emerged from the dust cloud, Msindo held a half smoked cigarette.

He placed it between his lips and lifted his dusty hands triumphantly into the air, pumping them up and down, the fists clenched.

“It’s mine!” he said.

“But I saw it first!” Qolo replied. “It’s his who wakes the hare.”

“It’s his who catches it.” Msindo spoke around the cigarette. “Bring matches.”

“I don’t have any,” Qolo said, but searched his pockets and produced a broken matchstick. He gave it to Msindo, who walked to the bottle store wall and scratched the matchstick on it. The matchstick flared, and he lit the cigarette in cupped hands and walked back to the mango tree, smoke drifting lazily from his nose, and the matchstick now between his teeth.

“Let’s drink my stshomi,” he said to Qolo.

Qolo lifted the scud and they drank, and placed it on the ground again.

“You were asking about my father?” Msindo said, now chewing the matchstick.

“Yes,” Qolo replied. “You did not finish the story. Pass me the cigarette.”

Msindo laughed. “That man is crazy,” he drew on the cigarette, one eye squinted, and blew smoke. Qolo’s eyes were fixed on the cigarette.

“I don’t know what kind of a man he is.”

Qolo snapped his fingers at him. “Cigarette Msindo!”

Msindo took one last drag on the almost finished cigarette and passed it to Qolo.

“Ta,” Qolo thanked him. “A white tourist was driving through the township with his little daughter,” he quickly said, “and the daughter saw a man passing a cigarette to his friend and said - Look daddy! Those two black men love each other – they are sharing a cigarette!” He laughed.

“Look! Look!” Msindo pointed with his finger.

A young man, smartly dressed in a grey suit, white shirt and floral tie, was approaching in their direction, speaking into a cell phone pressed to his ear.

“Nx!” Qolo clicked his tongue, the corner of his mouth pulled down. “Who does he think he is showing off to?”

Suddenly, the young man, still speaking into the cell phone, tripped on a stone and fell down.

Msindo and Qolo stared stonily at him, their faces expressionless.

The young man quickly got to his feet, picked up his cell phone, and looked around for his right shoe that had come off.

Qolo nudged Msindo and pointed. Msindo neighed in laughter. Qolo brayed. The young man's toes were showing through his sock. He found his shoe, quickly put it on and walked away without looking at Qolo and Msindo. A distance away, he started brushing himself down as he was walking. He rounded a corner and disappeared.

Msindo and Qolo, still laughing, slapped hands.

"What did I tell you my stshomi?" Msindo said between laughter. "See what his cell phone and smart suit did to him?"

"And his socks!"

"Look at me. I wear tyre sandals and overalls, clothes suited for falling, but you will never see me falling, even when I am dead drunk from scud. Why? Because I don't pretend. I don't hide the tatters of my life behind a smart exterior. I am original. We are original, Qolo my stshomi. In fact, he should give me that suit and I will give him my overalls. It would suit me in the beer garden, don't you think so Qolo?"

"Be content with what you have," Qolo said. "That way you will never be jealous in life, like your father."

"Right on the eye!" Msindo instantly replied. "Anyway, a suit would make me fall like that Satan," he chuckled, clicked his tongue, and then continued. "You know what my father did?"

"Mh mh," Qolo grunted negatively.

"He is crazy. Our neighbour bought a television last week, and father is no longer speaking to him."

"He is jealous!"

"I told him that to his face last night."

"Msindo!"

"I was telling him the truth."

"What did he say?"

"He called me by my mother's private parts."

"Ah! Don't tell me!"

"Then mother jumped on him with a pot. You should have been

there Qolo. You would have enjoyed yourself.”

“They fought?”

“Even better than America versus Iran.”

“It’s not Iran Msindo. It’s Israel!”

“What can you tell me? It’s Iran! You don’t read the newspaper.”

“It’s Israel Msindo!”

“It’s useless arguing with you. I was telling you about my father.”

“Yes.”

“When they finally stopped fighting, the kitchen table was upside down, the floor was full of isitshwala and plates.”

“And where were you?”

“I was on the grandstand.”

“Grandstand?”

“I was standing on a kitchen chair clapping my hands and ululating for my mother. The neighbours were looking in through the window, including the one who bought the TV.”

“But Msindo, you mustn’t bring trouble home. Here at the bottle store it’s okay, but not at home.” Qolo picked up the scud and drank from it.

“Truth is trouble, don’t you know that?” Msindo replied, taking the scud from Qolo. He drank and placed it on the ground. “If you say I mustn’t bring trouble home, you are saying I mustn’t speak the truth. But why hide it. I believe in the truth.”

An old woman was walking towards them, using a walking stick.

“Yes you are right,” Qolo agreed with him. “I don’t know why people hate the truth like that.”

“Look at me,” Qolo said. “I am unemployed, I am a drunkard, but I am not ashamed of that, even if people ridicule me over it.”

“Even me also,” Msindo said. “I sleep on the floor in the kitchen at 35 years of age, but I am not ashamed of that, it’s God’s choice, and who am I to change it? Some guys sometimes laugh at me, but it doesn’t hurt me - because it’s the truth.”

The old woman got near them.

“You,” Msindo addressed her in a polite voice. “You must go to the rural areas and become a witch there with other old women. We

don't want any grandmothers here in town."

Without warning, the old woman whacked him hard across the mouth with her walking stick.

Msindo cried out in pain and spat three teeth to the ground. He brought his hand up and covered his mouth as blood spurted from it. The old woman whacked him again on the top of his head. Msindo dropped to the ground and lay still.

She turned on Qolo, fire in her eyes. Qolo raised his hands over his head.

"It wasn't me gogo!" he cried out. "It was him." He pointed at Msindo's still body.

She feinted a blow at his head.

"Mayi babo!" Qolo cried out, and ducked. The old woman walked past him and disappeared down the street.

Msindo moaned and slowly stood up, his hand covering his mouth, blood flowing between the fingers....

My Dustbin

John Eppel

Bent, battered, banged about, my garbage bin,
once fascist – only flies were welcome – now
inviting, on collection days, vagrants,
pied crows, dogs, children, is a democrat.

Children on their way to school; sometimes, if
the garbage truck has broken down (again!),
on their way home; the girls like butterflies,
bedizened uniforms; the boys like moths

in colonial khaki, silver-grey.
Polite, they wait until the vagabond,
less messy than the fussy carrion,
departs with an empty plastic bottle

and a mouldy tomato. These children
have acquired the patience of queueing;
children of the neighbourhood; suburban;
queueing at my bin for a lucky dip.

Whirlwinds

Farai Mpofu

A gigantic eagle perches on the top of an anthill and rests in a trance. Instinctively she lifts her powerful wings and soars into the sky. The wind ruffles her feathers but up and up she flies, until she is a small black dot on that azure curtain we call the sky. She stops mid air and begins circulating rhythmically and then, without warning, plunges down into the middle of a cluster of huts.

“Swaa, swaa... swaa... huweee, swaa to the eagle,” cry the children, with their shiny Vaseline smeared faces and new Christmas clothes, as they wave frantically at the bird.

But she descends majestically, swooping towards a family of chickens that is running towards the refuge of the bottom of the boulder balanced granary. Mother Hen tries to protect her chicks and the desperate eagle, in a moment of madness, grabs her in a flash and carries her to the clouds. The village dwellers watch in horror and shock. And soon enough a terrible battle takes place in the skies. It is a maternal battle between Mother Eagle and Mother Hen, a blood fight of love. Mother Eagle needs food for her babies, while Mother Hen cannot stand the thought of leaving her chicks orphaned as Mother Eagle makes her into a delicious lunch. The battle is one of blood and passion. The village dwellers, children, mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles stand in the compound and watch and wait. The battle continues but suddenly the eagle lets go. Mother Hen falls from the heavens like a bolt of lightning. There is an ugly anxiety that grips the village. Mother Hen lands safely, on the red-brown dust, like a highly trained paratrooper. There is a talking silence. The whole village explodes into a cocktail of smiles, hugs and laughs. “Merry Christmas,” shouts old Nduna, as the whole village breaks into ululations and ear piercing whistles. As Mother Hen rushes protectively towards her chicks, mugs of steaming tea touch the lips of everyone. Chunks of bread with fruit jam and margarine are passed as the smell of roasting beef pervades the compound. Old Nduna looks at

his seed, and stares at the eagle as it flies away, his mouth turns into a toothless smile and he shouts at the top of his voice

“Merry Christmas, my children...”

“Pee, Pee, Pee!” hoots the kombi as it swerves to avoid the strange man walking in the middle of the road on a Friday night.

“Hey, you bloody fool, do you think this road is your bedroom? Busy dreaming you wanna die young, fuck off mani,” shouts the angry driver. Juba Nduna stares down at his badly torn pair of takkies, shakes his head and continues on his daily pilgrimage, back to the township from the industries. Juba turns down Mbira Avenue and passes by the Mbira Bar. The machine is now switched on. The machine hums all night. Its fuel is human blood. It is the money making machine that drags the young women from their houses to Mbira Bar to wiggle their bottoms at the men. The money passes fast from one hand to another as the machine roars with life. Juba is worried by the vision that almost got him knocked down by the kombi. He shakes his head and wonders what the fight between the eagle and the hen meant.

“Hey brother, come and let us talk,” whispers a seductive voice from the darkness beyond the durawall of Mbira Bar. Juba stops and looks towards the voice.

“Just for twenty thousand dollars, you can have a peaceful night in between my legs, come,” she whispers at him.

Juba looks at her with a blank stare and moves on. The woman curses and dissolves into the darkness. Juba thinks to himself, whistling a sad and lonely song. He sees the eagle and the hen, the remnants of his childhood; he also sees old Nduna smiling at him. He knows that life will never be the same. The city swallowed all that unity in the family. No one ever goes to the rural home since old Nduna left them to talk with his ancestors. The village is now a ruin. His uncles and aunts weep in the city. Everyone is dying. The disease continues to gobble up his family like a hungry lion. Juba sighs, and walks on, not knowing what the future holds for him. He has been searching for employment for the past two years, but nothing concrete

has come up. With college certificates, his faithful companions, he has knocked at every gate and door. The secretaries are usually very rude to him. But he has learnt to love them. When they slap him on one cheek he gives the other. He knows that behind their arrogance lies their power to make him a few thousand dollars richer or to keep him suffering. So he gladly offers them his other cheek to slap. His stomach growls like a hungry ghetto dog, but he is now used to hunger, his perennial foe, and this reminds him to walk faster towards his destination.

Going down Tutu Road he turns left and sees his sister's house, his home as well, come into view. He has lived in the house for years since his parents gave up this nightmare existence and let the disease take them. Since then she has been like his mother, she did not manage to finish school and go to college like him. But she is a hard-worker and sacrificed a lot for him. He clutches the twenty thousand dollars he earned at the railway siding, off-loading coal from the trucks. Knocking gently at the door he hears giggles within the house. He knocks even louder and tries to open the door, but it is locked. He curses and sits down.

"Who do you think you are?" an irritated voice from behind asks him.

"Hey, I meant no harm sister, I'm just tired," he responds innocently.

"Do you think I enjoy being fucked everyday, by all sorts of men I don't even know? I'm trying to make money so that you and I can live, but all you do is come and grumble outside," she shouts.

"Listen, Beatrice, I don't want to argue with you, I'm just not in the mood today. Look I've brought us some money that can take us for a few days," he responds.

"Shit, you ungrateful brat, I have put you through college and all you do is roam in the streets like an idiot. You think I'm your fucking whore huh?" She staggers into the house and in a moment comes back with a half empty bottle of cane spirit. She curses and aims the bottle at Juba's head. He ducks, and the bottle smashes into the dust. Juba leaps up and runs into the street, where a sizeable crowd has

assembled to enjoy the spectacle. The township dwellers always find solace in other people's misery, it makes them feel better. He moves through the crowd as his sister curses and tears her nightdress, ending up naked. As he walks away a small boy in dirty clothes shouts at him, "Lazy bum, you should learn to work like a man." The crowd laughs hysterically.

Something like a volcano begins boiling in his heart. He cannot contain it. He makes a sudden turn and moves towards the crowd and gives the small boy a very hard clap on his cheek. The crowd goes silent. The small boy lets out a loud wail and he turns to go. The crowd is still silent. In the jungle of that silence an angry woman's voice shouts.

"Catch the coward!"

Juba runs like a man possessed by evil spirits. He runs away until he can no longer hear the crowd in hot pursuit. He runs through the alleys, jumps over streams of burst sewers and continues running. He continues running. His run is no longer an ordinary run, he is tired of Mabutweni township and its demons. He has had fights with Beatrice before, but this one was really bad. The neighbours are now used to the fights, which they cherish, and are always there to add fuel to the fire when hell breaks loose. However, today, a little voice similar to that of old Nduna tells him he will never go back to that wretched matchbox-like house. Something in the heart of his guts tells him he will never see his drunken sister again. As he passes through a dark alley his run gives birth to a slow and casual walk. He hears voices whispering romantically to each other. The feminine voice then screams in painful pleasure. As he gets closer he realises, with horror, that the male voice belongs to that of the newly elected councillor, his former school head-teacher. The girl he is locked to is wearing her school uniform. Juba, not wanting to be noticed by the man, quickens his pace...

Who is the thief?

The nurse who kills her patients,
The teacher who fucks his students,

The policeman who takes bribes
The secret agent killing his enemies,
The politician squandering the masses' monies,
The Pastor fucking people's wives...
Or the man who crawls in the dark waiting to rob innocent travellers?

It is the early hours of the morning in a shebeen. The prostitutes are dancing half naked and half drunk with skokian. Juba has thrown in the towel. The home made brew is cheap and strong. Juba looks at the one with wide hips and a small beautiful face.

She smiles at him, comes to him and whispers. "You can have it for free at my place if you like."

He looks at her and nods like a schoolboy. Juba stares at his torn takkies, his khaki envelope carrying his college certificates and at the prostitute with big hips and a small beautiful face. He stands up from the small stool, grabs her hand and they walk out. In the dusty street, he feels that he will not be patient any more. He grabs hold of the khaki envelope, shreds it to pieces, and throws them into the morning air. He will probably rob three or four of those township dwellers, raise enough money to go to Johannesburg, after jumping the border, and graduate into the world of crime. After all, everyone comes back driving flashy cars in the Bulawayo ghettos when they go to South Africa.

Bathing with Tadpoles

Judy Maposa

March and April, the months of rain. Not the rain that awakes the urge to turn the earth and put in the seed. Nor the rain to spur plants to race towards maturity. But the rain that falls softly, that when you wake up in the morning you are surprised that it rained so much.

The rivers flow and the dams fill up. It is the rain that prepares the earth for a long dry season. It is the rain of a gentle time, of sparkling rock faces and gurgling brooks. It is the rain of a time crystallized in memory as the age of innocence.

It evokes feelings of contentment and carefree days when consciousness is filled with blue skies, green fields, shimmering mountains and laughing humanity.

A time when we are alive but not fully awake, the long season of the instant before we open our eyes.

We cleaned out the pools at the start of the rainy season. Mountain goat droppings, discarded lizard skins and the past year's dead leaves all flew out of the natural rock pools under our relentless grass brooms.

The rain came and the mountain pools filled and overflowed. There was no hurry to get to these natural water stores. We let the animals that inhabited the hills and mountains get first taste of the water. An observance of protocol. No longer would we see the trail of the mountain goat trekking down to the water sources on level ground, for a while.

It never ceased to amaze how the pools had been formed. One could easily imagine the hand of a master mason at work. A hand that lovingly scooped out lumps of black granite to create perfectly shaped bowls on bare rock. Kidney, circle, pear, pools that sparkled in the sunlight, reflecting an often blue sky. Mirrors framed in black and grey rock that showed the ever-changing moods of the sky above.

The rock pools were all classified according to the use to which the water they received would be put. The bigger and deeper pools

that stood clear of trees and mountain grass were drinking water pools. They held rain water that tasted of clouds and rock and lichen. It was the tastiest water one could drink, water you could roll around the mouth to capture its multitude of flavours, before letting it slide down the throat. The water was collected in buckets and stored at the furthest end of the cooking hut, which was the coolest. When the sun was hot and people were taking a rest from their numerous chores, nothing could beat the mountain pool water as a thirst quencher.

Then came the pools that were used for all sorts of purposes. When the water in these pools was cleaner, we would take up our laundry on the gentle slopes and do our washing on the mountain faces. The slopes presented a colourful face as clothes draped on bushes and boulders to dry fluttered in the breeze.

The pools that held the greatest appeal were the bathing pools. In other months of the year we did our bathing along the river, where we collected water from wells dug in the soft sand in the riverbed.

In the afternoon sun the girls would troop towards the river, arms laden with buckets for bringing water back home, and some metal and plastic basins for bathing water. Then, in a thicket near the river, we would peel off our clothes and get down to the business of washing our bodies.

Green soap and pumice stone were passed from hand to hand until backs and heels were scrubbed clean. After drying off in the sun we liberally smeared Vaseline onto the skin, leaving our faces and limbs glistening like new copper coins. That was bathing by the river.

A most happy and vivid time was the time of bathing in the mountain pools. There were pools for girls and those for boys.

To the east of our homestead stood a hill with the gentlest of slopes on all sides, save to the west where there was a sheer drop. The east-facing slope had a network of the most fascinating pools. Some were deep, some shallow, but they all cascaded into each other until water ran into the ground below or was lost in rocky nooks and crevices.

After whole afternoons of rain it was time to take to the slopes to bathe. The older girls led the way carrying all the toiletries and change

of clothing. We would start on the pools at the lower end, gradually working our way up to the higher pools that were more secluded by boulders and shrubs.

There was an enchanted aura to the scene, as brown youthful bodies sat or moved around in various stages of cleaning themselves. Some shampooed their tight black curls with the leaves of a plant that grew in abundance at the foot of the hills, which worked better than any soap bought from the store. Others would soap each others' backs, gently scrubbing with cloth or pumice stone. Nails were trimmed and feet dipped in water then rubbed against the rough granite surface to remove dead cells.

It was such an innocent time, full of chatter and preening. A time of showing off a girl's ripening body as budding breasts, filling hips and bottoms were compared and flaunted.

The wide skies, brown bodies shimmering against black rock and warm sunshine completed this serene time. For the final rinsing we moved up to the big circular pool at the top. Here you could imagine that you were sitting in a swimming pool that had been placed on the apex of the hill; above, the clouds; below, through chinks in the rocks, a distant horizon.

The water was cool and clear right through to the bottom. And gliding smoothly in little clusters around the pool were tadpoles. Despite all the cleaning we did and the constant spilling from the rain, there were always tadpoles in the pool. So we swum and played together in the pool on top of the hill. Bathing with tadpoles.

March and April, the months of rain. A time of shimmering rock faces, sparkling mountain pools and bathing with tadpoles.

Something about Tea

Bryony Rheam

Back then Gran and I had one secret, although the number was to increase significantly in the next few years. Every Sunday, Gran would go to morning service. It was not held in a conventional church with stained glass windows and wooden pews. Instead, it was in an old hall, also used by the Girl Guides and the Women's Institute for their meetings. It was run down and needed a coat of paint, but it was clean and thoroughly swept out every week. There was a long trestle table near the front of the hall covered with a white tablecloth. On top were placed two vases of roses and a Bible. It was no ordinary church service either and my mother, even though she was not religious in any sense, would not have approved. There was no piano or organ; we had to sing without music. Two people sat at the table, one who read the prayers and the lesson, the other the clairvoyant who received messages from 'the other side' and relayed them to the congregation. At first I did not understand what was happening and why the messages were generally very vague.

"Is there someone here whose name begins with 'P'?" the clairvoyant might ask, or "I have a message from someone who's holding a wooden spoon in his hand. Does anyone know who I'm talking about?"

I thought the clairvoyant had been given a message to give to someone in the congregation by someone alive. When I found out that the messages came from dead people, I was horrified. I feared death and talk of ghosts and spirits scared me terribly. Gran explained to me that these weren't the ghosts of storybooks: headless horsemen and monsters dragging chains across castle floors, but spirit guides or guardian angels. Gran said that when you died your spirit stayed alive and you became a guardian of someone on earth whom you loved dearly. The way that you communicated with them was through a clairvoyant, a person with the ability to see and talk to spirits. When we first went to the church, Gran didn't receive any messages at all.

Some people's guardian angels, it seemed, were very active, while others seemed not to care about their human charges, for I noticed that it was often the same people every week that received messages.

One night I was staying with Gran and looking forward to a night in front of the television. I was allowed to stay up much later with her than at home, a privilege I did not let my mother know about. Before the late night film started, she made tea in her big orange teapot and set two cups and saucers on the tray.

"Go and get me a clean tray cloth, won't you, Ellie?" Gran asked me, and I went obediently and looked for one in the linen cupboard. I couldn't reach the shelves where the cloths were kept, so I went and fetched a chair to stand on. I saw the blue cloth that Gran normally used, but I wanted to find a different one in order to give the evening some sense of occasion. I was rummaging in the back of the cupboard when I found a green beret. It looked like something someone in the army would wear. I put it on, pushing it down on my head as it was so big, jumped off the chair and marched into the kitchen where Gran was just stirring the pot. I saluted, stamped my foot and said "Yessir!" Gran looked up, the beginnings of a smile curving her lips slightly. But it died at the sight of me. Immediately I knew I had done something wrong.

"Oh, Ellie, take that off, please," she said, in a deathly hushed voice that was worse to hear than if she had shouted at me. I reached up and took the cap off.

"What's wrong?" I asked, turning it over in my hands.

She swallowed hard and put the lid on the teapot. There was a pause and then, "It was my son's." I didn't understand. Gran only had one child, my mother. "He died," she continued. I looked down at the cap. "He was killed during the war. Please put it back, Ellie." I turned and went back to the cupboard, put the hat back and picked up the blue cloth. All thoughts of finding a more rarely used one were gone. I thought it best to stick to the tried and known in case I opened up another slow healing wound.

The next day we went to church and got there slightly earlier than usual. Gran got talking to Mrs Coetzee who wanted her to help out

with serving tea every week after the service. Gran was unsure; she didn't know if she was going to carry on attending church, or at least as often as she had been. I think she was disappointed she hadn't received any messages. Every Sunday as she drove home, she was very quiet and when she smiled it was sadly, as though she were trying to accept some terrible truth about life. Mrs Coetzee was one of those people who talked incredibly slowly and who took a long time to get to the point, implying that making tea was a lot more difficult than it appeared and the responsibility it entailed was something that could not be bestowed upon just anyone. I stood by Gran's side, patiently at first, but gradually more and more restlessly. I crossed my legs and tried to turn my head as far back as possible but lost my balance and stepped on Gran's foot.

"Ellie!" she exclaimed, turning sharply to me. "Stand still!"

A large lady in a purple and blue kaftan was standing close by and saw what happened. She came across. "Have you seen the library?" she asked me in that bright patronizing way I associated with aging primary school teachers, women who think they possess some charm irresistible to small children but who, in reality, actually scare them. "Come with me, dear," she continued before I could answer. She took my hand in an attempt to lead me away. I stood my ground and looked appealingly up at Gran for help, but it was not to come.

"Go with the nice lady," she said, giving me a gentle push. I felt my heart fall to the bottom of my stomach, and had the incident the night before not happened, I may have become sulky and openly despised the large lady and tried my best to make Gran feel guilty. As it was, I allowed myself to be led away.

The 'library' was a small room at the back of the hall with two kitchen chairs in it and a coffee table. There was also a small cabinet with a rounded glass front. Inside it were two rows of books. The lady busied herself looking through them and emerged with three rather worn items. None of them were suitable for children and I looked at them despondently. Two were hardcover books with faded gold writing on the spine. They looked depressing. The other was a thin paperback with a plastic cover. The title read 'Mind Power' and across

the right hand corner of the cover was a yellow star with the word 'NEW!' in red letters. Underneath it said: '1978's US best-selling title!' All of a sudden I felt an overwhelming urge to cry. Here I was, abandoned to the whims of a large overbearing woman whom I did not know, being offered books to read whose hard, faded covers somehow threatened some sort of punishment, a berating for the previous night's discovery. Gran had left me; she was angry.

The large overbearing woman left me after being called by another member of the congregation to meet a visitor to the church. I was left alone in the room, perched forlornly upon one of the chairs. I sat with one of the books open and tears welling up in my eyes. Just as I could feel the first trickles down my cheeks, someone came into the room. It was someone I hadn't seen before, a tall, thin, slightly stooping man with grey hair and small grey sideburns. He had on an old dark suit and I remember that one of the buttons on it was navy blue whilst the rest were black. He had a slightly bristly chin and his breath, when he came closer, smelt of coffee.

"Hello, my dear," he said, smiling and looking rather quizzically at my reading matter, "what are you reading there?"

I showed him the books and his eyes widened comically, "My, you must be a clever girl if you're reading these!" There was a pause. "*Are* you reading them?"

I shook my head sadly, trying very hard not to cry.

"Are you here on your own?"

I shook my head.

"Is your mother outside?" he probed.

"My gran," I answered. My voice was just above a whisper as I struggled to hold my tears back.

"And who's your granny?"

"Her name is Mrs Saunders. But her friends call her Evelyn."

The man smiled. "Is she the lady talking to Mrs Coetzee?"

I nodded.

"Has she deserted you then? Or did you get tired of the ladies talking? Ladies *can* talk for a *very* long time!"

I tried to get some sort of answer out, but suddenly found myself

crying. I hated crying in front of strangers.

The man looked concerned and was obviously troubled by my behaviour.

“Are you in the dog box?” he asked. “Is Granny cross with you?”

I nodded through my tears.

“Do you want to tell me what’s happened?” he asked and I nodded again.

Eventually my tears subsided into a sniff and he handed me a handkerchief.

“Keep it,” he said. “My wife gives me them every Christmas. I try and get rid of them during the year so I have a use for the ones she gives me the next time.”

I smiled weakly and dried my eyes with the large brown check handkerchief. There was something comforting about the man, something very honest about him, too. I felt he was genuinely concerned that I was upset, not dismissive or derisive as many adults can be.

I told him what had happened the previous evening and he nodded sympathetically every now and then, his arms crossed in front of him. He didn’t interrupt me at all and, when I had finished, sat for a few seconds in thought. I felt relieved to tell someone about the episode. It wasn’t something I normally did; most of the time I kept things to myself. Finally he said, “So your granny never told you about her son before?” I shook my head. “I see,” he nodded his head slowly. “She didn’t want anyone to know.” He seemed to say the last comment more to himself than to me. Just then there was a knock at the door and a head looked round and said:

“We’re just starting, Mr Philips.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, rather startled. “Just coming.” The head disappeared and the man turned to me and said, “Your granny’s not cross with you, you know.” He got up and went to the door, still rather distracted. “I must go. The service is about to start. Your granny will be looking for you.”

I slid off the chair and put the books back in the cabinet and then followed him out of the room.

The man was right. Gran was looking around for me. She smiled when she saw me and didn't seem to notice that I had been crying. I was relieved. We found a place to sit just as the rest of the congregation started singing 'Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah'. I looked around for the tall man but couldn't see him anywhere. It was only when the service started that I realized he was sitting up at the table. Once the prayers and the reading were over, Mrs Johnstone, one of the Church organizers, stood up and introduced a visiting clairvoyant from their branch in Kwekwe, a Mr Philips. Suddenly I was seized with panic. I felt like I had told a teacher some secret that they felt must be told to my parents. My palms began to sweat and I kept looking down at my feet to avoid catching his eye.

Mr Philips was not much different to the other clairvoyants who graced us with their presence every Sunday. He spoke in vague terms about someone with a red hat, someone who liked pickle sandwiches and a man called Fred who wanted to tell his wife not to worry as everything was going to be all right. Then he looked our way. He stared for about half a minute. My heart was beating fast. What would he say? Would he tell her? His body trembled suddenly and he closed his eyes.

"I have the name Evelyn," he said. I felt Gran start beside me. She put up her hand and I could see she was shaking. He opened his eyes, but although he was looking at us, it was as if he didn't see us at all. Instinctively, I looked over my shoulder, but the only people there were Mr Hunter and his sister, Mrs Braxton, sitting in the row behind us.

"I have someone here," he continued. "I don't have a name but it's a young man." Gran sat stock still beside me. Mr Philips's forehead furrowed slightly as though he were confused about something. "There's something about his clothes," he said, shaking his head. "He's wearing a uniform... some sort of uniform." His voice trailed off a little and then he added, "I think he was in the army."

I turned to look at Gran. She had her hand over her mouth and her eyes held a startled look. "It's my son," she whispered. "It's Jeremy."

Mr Philips nodded and half smiled. "He says to tell you not to

worry. He's OK. He says something... something about *tea*." There was a murmur of laughter in the congregation. Gran's love of tea was well known. Mr Philips closed his eyes and I could see his lips moving slightly, as though he was talking to someone. "Yes, tea," he said aloud, "something about doing something with tea."

"And otherwise," said Gran, "otherwise, he's all right?"

"Yes," smiled Mr Philips. "He's fine."

When Gran and I left the church that day, she was in a very good mood, smiling and laughing with something like the relief of someone who has been dreading something that has turned out all right. Before we drove away she had thanked Mr Philips for the message. He shrugged and said it wasn't up to him; it was up to the spirits who communicated with him. He was standing with a cup of tea in his hand and, as Gran left him, he raised it and said: "Remember." He smiled at me and turned away to talk to someone else. Gran looked for Mrs Coetzee and told her that she would help out serving the teas after the service. She left feeling very satisfied with life that day.

Lately, I have thought a lot about that incident. I cannot decide whether Mr Philips was a charlatan or not. Did he really see the spirit of Gran's dead son, or did he use the information I gave him to his own advantage? Or was he merely trying to help a little girl who had tripped over some family secret and who thought she had lost her grandmother's love?

The Coming

Godfrey M. Sibanda

By midday, the streets belong to green-clad youth militia, policemen, soldiers, and silent men in dark glasses. If you act, look, or talk funny, they pounce on you and give you the hiding of your life. Even the blind beggars, vendors, and moneychangers are nowhere to be seen, some of them having been relocated to the overcrowded police cells.

Huge posters announcing The Coming are everywhere. Radio stations play jingles extolling the Great Leader's virtues, his unblemished history, his victories over colonialists and counter-revolutionaries that seek to reverse the gains of Independence.

Every activity in town is centred on The Coming. Funeral wakes have been disrupted, the mourners instructed to go to the stadium at once. Also suspended are church services, weddings, and all sporting activities. In fact, any gathering of more than five people outside the stadium has received a de facto ban.

I stand at the window of my living room and, through a crack in the curtain, watch the procession of schoolchildren who sing revolutionary songs as they march into the stadium, followed by women in colourful kitenges that bear portraits of the Great Leader as he was, ten years ago. Behind them are the povo, hungry but expectant, surging forward in sweat-drenched queues to be body-searched and directed to a patch of grass on which to sit. Government trucks disgorge people from surrounding villages, dust clinging to their Vaselined faces. As the four-by-fours and Mercedes Benzes start rolling in and the big fat cats roll out the doors, there is a knock at my door.

The five youths who stand there are familiar to me.

"It is time to go, m'dala," one of them says respectfully.

"I'm afraid I can't come, my sons. I am feeling sick."

"What illness is this, that makes you not attend The Coming?"

"Diarrhoea, my sons."

It is not a commonly used word, in my tongue. There is silence for

a while, followed by raucous laughter and I move back a step, not sure of what to expect. Sometimes, such mirth is followed by extreme violence.

I hold out a bunch of papers in self-defence.

"I got these at the hospital, this morning."

The papers are passed from one hand to another in silence.

"I admire your courage, m'dala. You stand there and invent a rotten excuse for not going to hear the Great Leader speak. That is courage, recklessness, and stupidity, all rolled into one."

"It is the truth that I speak. I must have drunk a contaminated brew yesterday."

"You and a hundred others, m'dala. The Great Leader is coming and you want me to believe there's suddenly an epidemic in this town. And the epidemic only affects members of the Opposition Party."

"Perhaps we all drank from the same cup."

"Are you trying to be funny, m'dala?"

"I'm just trying to find some humour in all this, my sons. I... you have to excuse me. Nature calls."

Carefully, I lower myself onto the toilet seat. For the next five minutes I let nature follow its course while I try to imagine the discussion at my door. The five young men must be talking about ways of stamping out this clear manifestation of insolence or, as the Great Leader would put it, 'independent thinking'.

"I say we beat him to a pulp. Then he'll know for sure what diarrhoea is all about."

"He is an honourable man, comrades. I don't think he lies."

"An *honourable* man? Since when have members of the opposition been honourable? Do we have a traitor among us?"

"I'm sorry, comrades. Just a slip of the tongue."

"You're lucky you said that among friends. Anyway, I say let's just drag all these opposition people to the stadium."

"Yes, comrade. And we give them front row seats, too."

"What if they tell the truth?"

"They would raise a phenomenal stink right in the Great Leader's

face.”

“And what would He think of us?”

“Maybe their party gave them the tainted brew they all claim to have taken.”

“That is possible, comrade. The imperialists will stoop to the lowest levels so as to derail the revolution.”

“I say, enough of this farce, comrades. Let’s show these imperialist stooges who we are and what we stand for. Let’s shoot all of them dead!”

“You’re right, comrade. Viva la revolution!”

“Viva!”

“Aluta continua, comrades!”

Shaking in fear because of an imagined death sentence, I creep out of the bathroom only to find that my inquisitors have all gone. Relieved and a bit puzzled, I go back to the slit in the curtain to watch the multitudes being herded towards the kraal-stadium.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.

Behind me, the radio blares out the Great Leader’s recent great speeches in great fora throughout the globe.

“We shall not reTREAT, we shall not surRENDER! We are AFRICANS! This is OUR home, OUR land - we have NO OTHER! Who has the RIGHT to tell us about deMOCRACY when it is US who brought DEMOCRACY to this land? Who has the RIGHT to tell us about FREEDOM when we FOUGHT and DIED for that freedom? WHO, I ask you, WHO...”

He is an eloquent man, a Mark Anthony who lights fire in some hearts and drives men to rebel against themselves, to hate, maim, and kill, all in the name of... what?

Vengeance? Hate? Self-preservation? Or is it *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*?

I continue looking through the slit in the curtain, hoping to find answers to my inquietude at the drama unfolding outside, but my running stomach keeps tugging me in the opposite direction, to where I’ll now repair, if you’ll excuse me, *comrades*.

Past State House

Tawanda Chipato

Past State House

Wearily on my way to college
Flashy cars, vroom vrooming, blasting past me
A mockery of my two-legged speed
Potbellied black men feverishly clubbing a little white ball
Desperately trying to master the white man's game
Impoverished, underpaid, underfed security guards
Sleepwalking, from a brutally cold night shift
Hurrying home to encounter more horrors
The beautifully manicured golf club greens
In sharp contrast
To my battered, borrowed attire
The lovely, imposing Mount Pleasant mansions
No longer a childhood dream, but outright fantasy
'Alice in Wonderland' revisited

Past State House

Trudging along, on my way back from college
My head crammed full of unusable bullshit
The blazing sun evaporating it all away
The painful rumbling of my stomach
My ever-present, resiliently stubborn companion
Potbellied black men, the nouveau riche,
Still trying to master the white man's game
Flabby, overfed white men wheezing past me
Jogging, jogging, to where? Why?
God only knows!
"Run, mfana, run!"
Shouts from pampered, red-eyed, combat wearing guards
Ugly AK 47's pointed menacingly
At my fast disappearing posterior

The welcome sanity of the Avenues at last!
Beautiful skyscrapers, telling an outright lie
Of the life and loves of those behind this misleading façade
Skimpily dressed, diseased whores
Standing provocatively at corners
Openly selling disease and death in broad daylight
Street corner vendors plying their trade
Selling much more than is on display
Young men about town
Swallowed whole by their own sense of self importance
Hustling, conning, stealing
A fruitless search for the not-so-mighty dollar.

King House at last!
My sanctuary, my house of hunger, my hell!
Home at last!

Crossing the Divide

Derek Huggins

The rains had come. Good soaking rains. The road through the veld of the Sabi North was awash with water and puddles that had lingered after the latest cloudburst. The atmosphere was heavy and charged with electricity. Far away, thunder was still knocking around in the heavens. But it was cooler and that was a relief for Greg Stanyon. He was heading for his camp at the disused ranch house on Wiltshire Estate after a night at the Enkeldoorn Hotel. He was hungover from the effects of beer and cigarettes. He'd had a good time, drinking lager and playing poker-dice for the next round with the distinguished, grey-bearded hotelier and a crowd of Afrikaner farmers. It had been expensive, but at least it had relieved the boredom of his lonely patrol.

During the long drive the country changed from the pale rain-washed fields of the Tribal Trust Lands to the undulating grasslands of the ranch where cattle grazed contentedly. The transformation was immediate.

Drumming over a cattle-grid, Stanyon saw a group of men on the road ahead and instantly slowed down. They wore overalls and several had sticks in their hands which they were using to poke at something small and dark at the side of the road. As they did so, they jumped back, as if in fear, but laughing, while clutching at each other. As soon as they heard the vehicle, they stood still and watched him approach. Stanyon braked hard and skidded to a stop. He put his head out of the window and said, "Mangwanani. What's going on?" There was no reply. "Ini indaba?" he asked again. Still there was no answer. He was even more curious. He got out of the vehicle, slamming the door behind him. Crossing the road, he passed through the gathering to see the object of their amusement. And there, on the verge, was an owl, a big bird, tawny brown with saucer-like eyes and pointed ears. It stood motionless with an air of seemingly cold detachment. One wing hung useless and the trailing feathers touched the ground. Stanyon turned to the men. "Why do you tease the bird?" he asked. There was no reply.

They looked uncomfortable and averted their eyes. "Why are you teasing it?" he asked again more coldly. Then, leaning quickly forward, he pulled the stick away from the hand of the nearest man. There was no resistance but the man looked startled. "Hey, come on," he challenged. "Answer me." He poked him in the chest with the stick.

"We were playing," answered a tall man in white overalls.

"Playing?" the white man said contemptuously.

"Yes," said the foreman. "It was only a game. The zizi looks polite, but he becomes very angry when you get close to him." Stanyon looked at the owl, which remained stock still. "Look," said the foreman, "I will show you." He extended the stick he was holding towards the owl. The bird swelled its breast feathers, hissed loudly and struck out at the stick.

"That's enough," Stanyon warned the man angrily. "The game's over. Leave it alone. And as for the rest of you, get back to your work. Go on. Hamba." The men turned away, meandering across the road to the fence line from where they regarded him sullenly. Stanyon studied the bird. Then he went to the rear of the Land Rover and returned with his sleeping bag. Unzipping it, he approached the hissing owl, cast the bag over it and ensnared it in its folds. Gathering up the bundle, he hurried back, arms outstretched, deposited it on the floor of the vehicle and closed the door. He got in and started the engine. He looked at the men as they tightened the wires of the fence. "Boss up!" he shouted to them as he drove away. Arriving at his base, the rain came on heavily and he ran for shelter, leaving the owl buried under his sleeping bag in the back of the vehicle.

It was in the afternoon that he returned and backed the vehicle close to the low veranda wall. He got out and opened the rear door and reversed another foot or two. Then he went into the house and returned with a broom. Going to the side of the Land Rover he extended his arm through the window and pulled the sleeping bag clear. The owl stood his ground. Stanyon then, with his broom, pushed and prodded the bird towards the open door. It hissed at him. "Go on," he muttered. "Out." Eventually it jumped and scabbled onto the low wall. Stanyon then parked his vehicle well away under a tree and

walked back to the house thoughtfully. Sitting down on a canvas chair, he studied the bird. It was a giant eagle owl. It stood on the wall and looked at him with its huge luminous yellow eyes, delicately flecked with brown, its pupils dilated to tiny points. "I would like to keep you," said Stanyon as he extended his hand gently towards the bird. Again, its feathers rose and it hissed at him. He looked closely at its wing. It was broken badly and the bone was showing through. Even more slowly he stretched out his hand towards the bird. Closer, even closer, than before. But he was too late in snatching away his hand. He swore softly to himself as he wrapped his handkerchief around his bloodied wrist. Getting up, he went inside and returned with his Greener shotgun. "God. You're a beautiful creature," he said softly to the bird, which looked at him steadily yet with disdain.

The man sat for a long time thinking about what he had to do. He was captivated by the owl but hated it for the problem it gave him. He was many miles from the nearest town – the nearest vet. He could never hunt for it, feed it, heal it. Suddenly he got up, working the lever of the Greener as he did so, and inserting a cartridge into the open breach, snapped it shut. He did not bother to aim but, pointing from the hip, just pulled the trigger. The shotgun jerked in his hands and the stock kicked into his side. He ignored the pain. Out of the explosion of the discharge came a long whistling sigh from the owl, which now legless and bloodied about the belly, sank down and seemingly settled into the wall. Except for its eyes. The eyes still lived. They were still magnificent, sparkling with the instant of shock, the lights in them changing momentarily with the realisation of pain yet glowing bright with a light and life that radiated up through their transparent depths. The eyes watched him. They stared at him unwaveringly, expressing bewilderment. Stanyon was transfixed. He begged silently for the end to come quickly. "Why?" he asked himself. "Why did I have to do it this way? Why did I not aim and blow its head off? I'm worse than the farm hands. They would not have killed it. They are superstitious. The zizi is their harbinger of death. They would have left it on the roadside when they became tired of tormenting it. A civet cat, a serval, or a jackal would have taken it in the night." He sought to justify himself.

“It was doomed from the moment it alighted too late before the rush of an oncoming vehicle.” Stanyon felt emotionally drained as he watched the bird in its suffering, but resisted the thought to reload and shoot again. He was fascinated by the owl’s eyes. And then they dimmed, degree by degree, as the bird’s breathing became more laboured and the hissing sighs, punctured by longer periods, became more terse. Stanyon watched the life slowly go out of the cruelly torn body. And at the end, the lights in the eyes reduced themselves to nothing more than pin heads. The owl’s head sank wearily down to rest on the wall, and with a final expiration, the last flicker of life flared brightly into light once more. And then was gone....

Later, after he had carried the carcass of the owl by the wingtip and thrown it under the trees of the encircling bush for the scavengers to find in the night, and he sat on the veranda in the canvas chair, drinking a beer and watching the sun go down in a blaze of golden light, he remembered silently condemning his father as cruel and heartless for a similar deed. It had been early on a cold, frosty morning when he was a very young boy that his father had put the mouse bait in the yard outside the back door of the flat which overlooked the mineral water works and the Catholic school, and the blue tits had come and settled on the adhesive board. They had become stuck by the feet and try as they might they could not free themselves and fly away. And his father, flustered and perturbed, had taken the poker from the fire-side grate, and gone out and killed every one of them.

The Photo

Mathew Chokuwenga

The sun is a ball of fire slowly moving across the October blue and white-grey sky. It is the object that has turned the whole earth into a boiling pot.

Musafare is as wet as a flooded river. Sweat is everywhere on him. He feels it in his old shoes, the shoes he never takes off in anyone's presence, because they begin to speak aloud of an unpleasant smell. He steals glances at the fluffy sun and wishes he could quench it with a bucket of water. To his tired mind it is like a piece of glowing charcoal.

He also feels sweat in his armpits. How he hates sweat in them. He lifts one of his arms and puts his head there so that his nose can detect the degree of stench. Oh, it smells terrible, he thinks, lowering his arm quickly and pulling away his oval head. He adjusts the heavy bag that's hanging on his shoulder. Its straps feel hot and painful on his flesh. Slowly the straps are digging into him, but he has no choice but to hold on and to walk on. Besides I am nearly there, he observes. His feet are now so heavy and they are begging to rest, they are dragging along the ground in protest.

Dragging him there. Where? He is not quite sure where. Slowly he descends into Emakhandeni high density suburb. The houses stand as a hundred small boxes of different colours and sizes in his eyes. In the middle of his loneliness, a car hoots behind him. He jumps out of the road cursing bla - bla - bla. He almost falls into the drainage ditch that's a deep trench lacing the red gravel road, filled with growing grass and papers and other junk. The driver of the old model green Fiat curses back bla - bla - bla, his hand movements out of the window helping his yapping mouth. His last audible words are "Wake up, you rural boy!" The words make Musafare angry and he manages to shake his fist after the shrinking car. He is careful now to walk at the edge of the road. He walks on in the rising mist of red dust that the car has just agitated. His mind speaks. It's just a piece of old metal, someone

without a car is better. He waves the dust away from his face, by waving a palm to and fro.

He is almost there. The houses begin to swell into giants in his eyes. They are now life size buildings and the suburb has expanded. It can no longer fit into the hole he was making with the fingers of his left hand when he was far away. Even the single blue house just ahead of him cannot fit into this hole any more.

The blue house has a small garden right here at the front and there is a fat woman picking some rape leaves. He walks to the tall locked black gate and waits for the fat woman to look in his direction. She does not take long to notice him.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, I need to ask you something.”

“You can ask.” She continues with her vegetable picking.

Musafare draws a khaki envelope from his trouser pocket. The envelope is old and dirty. Inside is his father’s black and white photo. He removes the photo. His father is a young man in his twenties, big afro hair, white tight shirt, trousers that are very flared at the base and tight from the thigh up to the waist. Shoes with a very big heel to conclude. This is how his father looks in the photo. Musa’s face wears a smile, almost an invisible smile. He has just remembered something funny, the name of the shoes his father is wearing in the old photo is ‘Get Down the Mango Tree’. What a name to give a shoe.

Trying to keep the conversation to himself and the fat woman, he lowers his voice to a near whisper. “I am looking for my father.”

“What?” the fat woman says, curving a palm around her left ear and pointing it in his direction.

“I am looking for my father, I have his photo here.”

The fat woman approaches Musafare. “Can I see?” Musafare holds the photo up to her face. She throws a quick glance and speaks. “I do not know him.”

“Are you sure you have never seen anyone like him?”

Her yes does not come by her mouth but by the nod of her braided head.

Musafare searches for a piece of paper that was supposed to be in

the envelope with his father's photo. It's not in there. But it was in there just now. He shakes the envelope while it is wide open and upside down. He is confused. "But?"

The piece of paper is lying on the ground. He notices it and picks it up with a smile. Taitos Sibanda is his father's name. When he lifts his head up, the woman is not there. She must be coming back just now. Just now becomes ages. Musafare slowly walks away frustrated and angry.

He walks on along the road, not sure what to do next. Hunger, thirst, tiredness have cooked the frustration in him. He feels a tear filling his left eye. It's flooding out of his eye. He pulls up his collar to wipe the symbol of his hopelessness and fear and confusion away. Symbol of the heaviness of the life he is facing. "Why me, Lord?" he asks. "Why me?" His face is facing the sky that's not so blue, yet not so white nor so grey.

His mind speaks. My father refused to accept my mother's pregnancy that carried me seventeen years ago and he gave us his back for good. I have no education. I can't get a job. Dear Lord, I am just an object meant to be laughed at and mocked. Now my mother is dead and my step-father won't have anything to do with me and ...

Before his thoughts are completed, there is the sound of a truck breaking hard. Loud hooting. The truck hits him and high he goes. For several moments his body is in orbit. Now down it comes, head first, crashing onto the tar.

Everyone at this not so busy, not so large, shopping centre rushes out to see. Everyone holds their words from their tongues. The truck driver climbs out of his truck full of fear. His right palm is on his moustached mouth. For a moment he stands some distance away from Musafare's body that is bleeding everywhere. He steps towards Musafare and lowers his very slim, very dark frame beside the disfigured body.

He is not sure whether to touch him or leave him. To run away, to cry or to just die. Seconds pass. The crowd is a swarm around the kneeling driver and the lying body of Musafare.

A heavy voice that has been disfigured by the brewed community

beer swallows the silence.

“Excuse, excuse.”

It must be the police, the driver and crowd conclude. When the frame that’s carrying the heavy voice finally penetrates the thin wall of the crowd, everyone notices it’s just Mudhara Zuze, the shoemaker. Mr Know-it-all. Mr No-one-beats-me. Mr Rich. “Do not see me like this, I am rich at my home ekhaya. I have lots of cows, goats, not to mention chickens.” No one who has had a conversation with him has been spared such arrogant lines.

Mudhara Zuze kneels down beside the young boy’s body. From experience, he knows that the body is now just a corpse. He notices something in the corpse’s hand. A black and white photo. Slowly he pulls it from the frozen fingers of the corpse. The crowd grumbles, disapproving of what their local shoemaker is doing. He is now quite an old man, in his mid sixties, white hairs in his long beard and long hair. He peers at the photo and recognises his own image. He has the same photo at home.

He leaves the photo there on the black tarred road and cuts through the crowd, confused and scared. Just wanting to run away. Not sure from what. In the distance, sirens approach and the atmosphere slowly fills with sadness.

Full Circle

Catherine Buckle

It was in the first week of October 2000 when Shirley was finally forced out of her home on Barrymore. No seed had been planted in the land. No food would be grown this year.

Shirley sat on the floor of the strange room and stared at the chaos around her. This was what her life had been reduced to, a pile of boxes. The pain in Shirley's heart was raw, like a bleeding wound, and she could not stop thinking about what had happened, in fact she couldn't think about anything else. Shirley had lived on Barrymore all of her adult life. From a run down and unkempt property, she had built it up into a profitable enterprise and a place that she was proud to call home. Her skin was baked a deep and permanent brown from having spent almost every daylight hour outside, checking the livestock, working on the fruit trees, supervising the crops and the hundred and one other tasks and problems that came with farming. Every part of Barrymore held a memory for Shirley: the eucalyptus trees where she had hung the bee hives; the mahobohobo trees where the sheep and cattle gorged on ripe fruit at Christmas; the well she had climbed down into, rescuing the week old calf; the plum orchards, where once there had just been bush was now covered with hundreds of trees groaning with fruit. There were other special places on Barrymore too that held far more personal memories: where she had picnicked with friends and braaied with neighbours, where the graves of three of her dogs were. Shirley's laughter and tears were in the wind on Barrymore.

Over and over again she relived that terrifying night: the incessant shouting and whistling; the clattering and thumps of sticks and stones being thrown onto the roof; the banging of rocks against the burglar bars and the drunken laughter and repetitive drumming of the men who had camped out on her lawn. She could still smell the smoke that had curled in under doors and through ventilation blocks when the

men had lit fires against the walls of the farmhouse to scare her out. She could still see the broken glass that had littered her floors and furniture when the mob had begun smashing the windows.

Now that it was over, Shirley wanted to curl up into a little ball and pretend none of it had happened, but she had to face it. In a way that final night of horror had come as something of a relief, because it had taken away the indecision. It had put an end to the months of agonising harassment and intimidation from the people who were determined to chase her off the land and out of her home. She knew that hundreds of people had gone through similarly traumatic evictions from their homes, but no words could prepare you. Nothing could be said that would adequately equip you for the intensity of emotions that you would have to go through: pain, grief, despair, anger, frustration, rage.

Four years passed and each time the msasas shook off their leaves and took on new colours - lime, burgundy, crimson, hot chocolate, Shirley thought of Barrymore and the land and home that had been taken from her.

It was in the first week of October 2004 when Blessing was forced out of her home on Barrymore. No seed had been planted in the land. No food would be grown this year.

Four years ago Blessing had, like everyone else, gone to the meetings in the village. Always there were meetings and always you attended so that you would be the same as everyone else and not attract attention. The Big Men addressing the meetings made grand promises. They talked of everyone having their own land. They talked of dams so big that you needed a boat to cross from one side to the other. The thought of all that water made Blessing weak with anticipation. She had never thought the day would come when she wouldn't have to carry water in a bucket on her head. The Big Men talked of seed and fertilizer and great fields that stretched so far into the distance that they became part of the sky. They talked of electricity and boreholes, of irrigation and tractors. They talked of great prosperity and said all the people had to

do was go and take the farms. The Big Men said no one would stop them, the police would not interfere.

At first Blessing did not believe the talk she heard at the meetings. She did not understand how she could just go and take over someone's farm, house and business. Surely it was stealing? Blessing did nothing. She watched as some went to the farms and took plots. No one stopped them. The meetings went on and the pressure increased. People told Blessing she was being a fool and a sell out not to go and join the others. Eventually she gave in and went with the others who were planning to take another farm, a farm called Barrymore.

Blessing remembered that day with shame. She remembered how they had shouted and banged drums and thrown things on the roof to scare the murungu away. Blessing heard the talk and knew that some of the boys had been there for months trying to scare the woman away. Blessing was glad she had not been a part of those months and she was not proud of her involvement on Barrymore on that last night.

The plot on Barrymore that was allocated to Blessing was dry and covered in bush, but it was her own – or so The Big Men said. The water was very far away and there were no pipes but Blessing used her bucket, just as she always had. The soil was baked hard and there were many stones but what mattered was that this place now belonged to Blessing. For four years Blessing toiled on the small plot. She built herself a small house using poles and mud and covered the roof with thatching grass. The shack was not as good as her house in the village and she missed many things about her real home. She longed for her girlfriends, for the laughter and stories they had shared as they fetched wood and carried water together.

Blessing never got a chance to sleep for even one night in the big old farmhouse - the rough boys and men who called themselves the 'Veterans' took the main house on Barrymore right at the beginning after the murungu had left. The 'Veterans' also grabbed the land with the plum trees and every year Blessing watched as they got smaller and smaller harvests from the trees, because they did not give them fertilizer or enough water. At Christmas time, when the trees were covered in plums, the beetles came too – thousands of yellow and

orange spotted beetles. The 'Veterans' did not spray the trees and so the beetles ate the plums faster than the men could pick them.

The promises made by The Big Men, of tractors and dams and irrigation, had also not materialised and hope faded in Blessing's mind. She no longer believed that she would ever have title deeds that said that she, Blessing, owned this plot on Barrymore. Even so, Blessing worked tirelessly, day and night. She built a small shower room and dug a toilet pit. She grew green vegetables and tomatoes for sale, but this was limited by how much water she could carry on her head every day. In summer she planted maize, with pumpkins and beans in between, and in winter she dug clay and moulded bricks so that one day she could build herself a real house on Barrymore.

It all changed for Blessing when the men came in the night. She did not know for sure if they were police or army, but they carried guns and they meant business. They set Blessing's hut alight and told her it was no longer her house or her plot. They told her she must go back where she came from and not return to Barrymore. They told her she had settled herself there illegally. When Blessing said she had a letter, which had her name and the location of the plot, the men would not listen. They said the letter was forged; it was not really from the people who allocated land. Blessing shouted and tried fighting back but it was useless, the men were very rough. There was no one to help her save her belongings from the fire that dropped down from the burning roof. The people on all the plots around her were also being evicted and Blessing was alone. She could not save her mattress or the second hand wardrobe she had bought recently, they were too heavy.

Blessing sat on the side of the main road with the little that was left of her belongings. Everything was filthy and stank of smoke. She watched The Big Men as they arrived on Barrymore. They had not come to help her, but to take over everything for themselves. Blessing had no one to turn to. Everything was lost. She had lost her home, her heart and her belongings on that place called Barrymore. The place where no seed had been planted and no food would be grown, again.

Illuminating Flames

Pathisa Nyathi

The leaping crimson flames
Of mopane wood fires
Out in rural Kezi
Still flicker large in my city mind.

Ndebele folklore
Traditions
Mores
Philosophies
Told by the fireside
Still guide me
As I fumble and grope
In the darkness of city lights.

I remember my father
Lying on his back
Narrating story after story
Night after night.
Little did I realise then
He was equipping me with a survival kit
For a world gone too materialistic
Too individualistic
And too cold
To care for us
Its children.

For the survival kit
For the ability
To adjust to different situations
For the tolerance
In the face of provoking situations

For these and many more
Father
I see you through the golden flames of wisdom
And thank you warmly.

Rosewater

John Eppel

He was not exactly camp, not visually anyway; but he saturated himself with the sweet scent of roses, a scent that remained in the classroom even when he wasn't there. I didn't mind; in fact I rather enjoyed it; it seemed to have a calming effect on the more rowdy boys. His nickname was Rosewater.

I had known he was gay. In the third term of his second year at school he had written me a deeply embarrassing composition entitled 'To Sir with Love'. I doubt if anyone else beyond his intimate friends knew, since, in his culture, homosexuality was taboo. It was a colonial thing, a white thing; it was unAfrican. There certainly wasn't anything effeminate about the way he threw a discus or put a shot. And, while he permeated scrum after scrum, ruck after ruck, maul after maul, with attar of roses, it was not thurification which won him, two years running, full colours for rugby in a rugby-obsessed school. He looked macho, behaved macho, talked macho... but he smelled of *rosa damascena*.

He carried it around with him in a plastic atomiser, the kind gardeners use to spray insecticide on plants. He used it sparingly in cooler weather, but when it was hot - and it is hot most of the time in this part of the world - he sprayed it all over him and all round him. Our incense-bearer.

It happened when Rosewater was in his final year at high school. He was a senior prefect and captain of the athletics team; he was one of the school's best academics. I'll never forget that night as long as I live, and I'll never know what, finally, pushed him to do it. Later, much later, come to think of it, I was reminded of Auden's lines:

About suffering they were never wrong,
the Old Masters: how well they understood
its human position; how it takes place
while someone else is eating or opening a window
or just walking dully along.

How art informs life! I was probably doing one of those mindless things when it took place. Forty years old now, a man among schoolboys, a lower case old master; eating the leftover wing of a chicken filched from the cook matron's pantry; or opening the window of my single room in the hostel to let in a fresh supply of sewage-and-deodorant, socks-and-chlorine, floor polish-and-orange peel scented air: the redolence of boarding school; or, yes, just walking dully along.

Why not me? Why this aromatic golden boy?

I happened to be on duty. There came a breathless banging on my door. Two or three juniors, whimpering like puppies. Sir, Sir! Come quick! It's Rosewater. He's dead! In the bath! He's dead, Sir! Please, Sir, come quick! It's 'quickly', not 'quick'! Don't you know the difference between an adjective and an adverb? What do you mean he is dead? If this is one of your sick jokes.... No joke, Sir. It's true. Please....

When I found that he was indeed dead in the bath, as I groped for the slightest sign of life, the jugular, the carotid, the mutilated wrists; and as I too began whimpering like the juniors cowering behind me, I was struck by something almost numinous. The characteristic smell of Rosewater had metamorphosed into a sight incarnadine, which gurgled away as I pulled the rubber plug.

City Insomnia

Tinashe Mushakavanhu

I had a strange dream. I was floating. Flying away. Mother was crying. Father stood still and sad with his head hung down, one arm tightly hugging mother's shaking body. My young siblings looked on. Poor Tapiwa and Tatenda. I flew higher and higher. I could see them, a small fading blur. Just as I was about to look up and disappear like Captain Planet, the alarm clock. Damn the alarm clock! It buzzed inside my head like a rusty chain. I reached out in an attempt to stop the noise, ready to mangle, crush and destroy the annoying instrument with my bare hands. Instead, I hit the snooze on the clock. Good enough. The noise stops.

The dream. I didn't understand the meaning of the dream. I take a quick shower. The water is cold. The thick rope of water whips my sleepy body into life. My teeth rattle in shivers and I start singing a church song in some kind of discord. Rhythmic discord. Water blobs and splashes on the floor of the tiny bathroom. The once white bathroom walls have discoloured with generations of slimy dirt. Goose pimples sprout on my body. Job's leprosy. Quickly, I smear Vaseline on my body. The act of smearing makes me think of bread and margarine. Saliva drools on my naked lap. 6:30a.m. I become panicky. I should be on my way out. My specs, my watch, my grey socks. I can't seem to get things right this morning. A poem clicks in my mind. I read it somewhere.

Tell the world to wait,
I am not ready yet -
I can't find my shoes,
My shirt's not ironed

Tell the world to slow down,
The phone's ringing -
I can't find my shoes,

My socks are drying in the oven

Tell the world to wait,
I'm not ready yet -
I can't find my shoes,
My shadow's still in the bath

I will miss Baba Shupi's white kombi. I don't pay. He is always doing me this neighbourly favour. Baba Shupi lives three houses from mine. I always take time to fork out money from my pocket, waiting for Baba Shupi to stop me. Baba Shupi always smiles at my effort. "No, don't worry mukoma. Mozotengawo drink palunch." I smile back and look away in fake embarrassment.

I start work at 8:30. But, I get into town early. I like the early morning walk around town, just feeling the pulse of Harare. Harare. An indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal. Harare. A city of restlessness. My heart thumps with excitement to the sound of whispering, marching feet. I walk aimlessly, secretly enjoying the game of disappearing, melting into the rushing crowds. I hate window shopping, admiring things I could not get now or tomorrow. My trousers pockets have holes. I hardly have money to spare for the week. Live for the day. Tomorrow is its own challenge. I have learnt to live for each day.

There is a spot I have identified in Mbuya Nehanda Street. A Coffee Shop. Quiet and concealed. I hardly ever see people go in and out. Maybe it's one of those uptown classy spots for the rich and few. Maybe I am wrong. Harare people have no money to waste. They are busy surviving, finding money, and getting on. I am one of them. But, I have given up. I am the dejected hunter who wanders in the bush aimlessly. The fisherman who toils all night long to catch frogs.

The Coffee Shop. I walk past it. I don't have the guts to walk in, to feel its environment. Is it like the ones in Fair Lady? Nicely laid tables with shining silverware, friendly waiters, a smiling till operator. Mellow music. It's embarrassing to go into a place and look foolish. Intruding. Conversations stop; eyes bore at you questioning your

identity. I will come when I have money. Sit and order a cup of steamy coffee and two big slices of chocolate cake. Sit silently. Read my newspaper, look through the window and think or watch Harare move.

Life in Harare has no stopovers; it's a long highway, going and going. Harare is not circular. A circle has an end. A line does not end. Harare is a straight line. People hardly ever reach their destinations. Destinations are dreams. Dreams yonder, far. Harare. It's just it: a dream. Nothing. Dreaming. My dreams never make it to reality. I give up easily. I always give up.

From Mbuya Nehanda, I turn into Nelson Mandela Avenue. I have no destination. I move from one street pavement to another. I see all kinds of people - some in overalls, others in suits, yet others in tight jeans and hipsters. The entangling maze of Harare. I can't find the exit. I am trapped. On both sides of me are people, cars and buildings. I do not have any idea where I am going. I am just walking. Harare the terrifying, unhinged blur. I cannot ascertain whether it's me or Harare that has come off its axis.

9:25a.m. I am late for work. Where am I? I am surprised to find myself lying on the yellow trimmed grass in Harare Gardens, just behind the grandeur of Monomatapa Crowne Plaza Hotel. I look around. Green, concrete benches yawning for people to sit and fart. A young couple kissing. Near the entrance is a woman wearing a faded Lyons Maid uniform selling dairy delights: ice-cream, yoghurt, fun & fresh. A cameraman passes by. A hangman's noose hanging on his throat. I meant to ask him, "Did you escape from Chikurubhi Prison?" I am sick. Mad. Ants crawling in my black T-shirt awaken me to reality.

9:44a.m. The fading white lettering on my T-shirt says it all, THERE'S NO HURRY IN AFRICA. But, the irony is, I am late for work. I hurriedly stand up. Not far from where I was lying is a water tap. I don't even think, just walk up to it and put a hand on the rusty handle. It yields with a reluctant creak; cold water begins to rush out. I push my face into the artificial stream. The weeds around my feet are scraggly, a sickly, faded yellow-green. I suddenly feel how tired my

feet are.

The picture of my boss makes me rush. I can see her scrawny face. Angry. I walk, jog and run towards the kombi rank between Cameron and Chinhoyi Streets. The place is overcrowded. People, people, people everywhere, all rushing about, obsessed with time. Time is money, they say. At one point they descend into the earth, at another, spew up. Harare's vomit, all panting, rushing, hurrying. The kombis are lined in rows. The rows remind me of our primary school garden. Everything was arranged in rows. I find my way through the confusion.

I get into a kombi. Gonzo, we call them. It's a small omnibus, with a funny rat shape. My legs hardly fit. I sit at the back. Right corner. I like to sit where there's a window. The stale air makes me sick. "Garisanai four-four vabereki." I am squashed. If I were a rat I would squeak, if I were a dog I would bark. The kombi starts up with a push from two ragged hwindis. It breaks into epileptic seizures, metals clonk and the black smoke that belches out slowly filters into the Harare air. 10:15a.m. I am very late. What will I tell my boss? The voice of the dirty conductor breaks into my thoughts. "One ariega. One asara vabereki." We are off to Msasa, the industrial hub of the city. The guy sitting beside me yawns a long yawn, releasing a streak of bad breath. Disgusted, I turn away and begin to watch trees and buildings speed past. I see a chain of cyclists threading on the unwinding road.

I disembark at the bus stop opposite the Econet Park. Msasa Park. Munda wemari. The place is noisy. I can hear the grinding roar of spinning money. Every sound is a coin dropping in the owner's sack. A signboard on my left beckons me.

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SPECIALISTS IN BEARINGS.

WE MAKE, YOU PAY.

The sight of the black steel gate makes my heart beat in a flurry. A glance at my watch makes my stomach grumble. I nod to the gate man. An old cheery man with a toothless smile. Mudhara Zuze. He reminds me of my grandfather, Sekuru Timoti. Just as I am about to

sneak to the work shed without being detected, I bump into Mrs Thatcher. She looks at me shaking her head and tapping her glasses against her chin like a doctor studying post-operative conditions. I mumble something about transport blues in Mufakose where I stay. She points at me without uttering a word. The finger says a lot. Watch out, or else. A brief look at her gold wristwatch and I am dismissed. 11:00 sharp. My dry lips crack into a smile. I punch the air in victory.

The day was short.

4:30p.m. I am on my way home. The old gate man. His toothless smile, the thick red bare gums. I hate the dehumanising searches. Bony fingers feeling the terrain of my body and the erect penis. I am embarrassed. I was thinking of Juliana. She is the star of my nights and the subject of my dreams. Juliana, I wonder what she is doing now?

SaMutoko gave me money. It was two months overdue. 5:03p.m. We get into town. The Coffee Shop. I need the stopover. I need the afternoon coffee. I have the money. I rush towards Mbuya Nehanda Street. From a distance, I can see the door of The Coffee Shop closed. Am I so late? As I walk to the door of the shop, an old man comes out. He is disgusting, his skin pale and rutted. His blue apron has wood dust all over the front. The man is very thin, a thick beard makes his head appear too heavy for the rest of him. Our eyes meet. It is then that the letters on the wall change. The Coffin Shop. But didn't I see a coffee shop in the morning? Today. I turn back in shame. Sometimes we think we know what we see when we don't know what we see. What we see is not what we see. What we don't see is what we see.

Harare and her instant faces. My prostitute Harare, one moment she is pleasant looking and the next pale and deathly. Harare.

Between Two Men

Addelis Sibutha

Merrily, MaSiziba and her husband Ncube left the beer hall in Luveve singing the latest song, *NomaKanjani* by South African songbird, Brenda Fassie. They had been dancing to this song all afternoon in the oppressive October heat, taking breaks with sips of ingwebu. The two were well known throughout the area for going out together every Saturday afternoon.

Ncube works at a clothing factory and is paid on a weekly basis. His company is not doing very well with the mushrooming of flea markets and mpenza nhamo second hand clothing sold along Lobengula Street and Sixth Avenue. In the beer hall some blame the difficulties faced by companies on the Government's Land Distribution Exercise, others give the cause as the fifty thousand dollars, commonly known as 'fifty kg', awarded to War Veterans or the Government's support of the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some blame the companies themselves. Whatever the reason, things are not the same. Unemployment and inflation are rampant. School fees are prohibitive for most, the brain drain leaves the country short of essential skills and there are shortages. Yes, lots of shortages.

One man in the beer hall had told the following story. A man asked his wife to prepare food and a blanket for him as he was going to sleep in the car in a petrol queue at one of the garages in town. The wife prepared everything, but suspected that her husband was using the petrol situation to get away from home and spend the night out with omazakhela. In the middle of the night, the wife phoned a taxi to take her to mazakhela's place and found her husband's car parked outside. The wife woke her husband with a barrage of insults and stones thrown at the house. Her husband beat her for leaving the house unattended.

MaSiziba and Ncube were talking about the day's experiences, describing how their friends were dancing at the beer hall, when suddenly a man appears before them from the thick bush wielding an

okapi knife. The man grabs MaSiziba by the hand, puts his knife to her throat and threatens to kill her if Ncube makes a move. He orders Ncube to lie facing down and searches his pockets with his left hand while his right hand tightly clutches the knife to MaSiziba's neck. He orders the two to remain silent. They are frightened to the bone.

Unable to find much in Ncube's pockets, he becomes angry and commands Ncube to turn over. He pushes MaSiziba backwards on to her husband. The man pulls his trousers down with one hand and forces himself onto MaSiziba. She tries to resist but he successfully penetrates her. At first she cries out, but later just moves with the rhythm of the man on top of her. With the weight of the two on him, Ncube endures the agony, sharp thorns pressing into his back. While fondling MaSiziba's breasts, the man tells her how good and sweet she is. She sweats. There is sweat on her back, her stomach, and thighs and in her armpits. She sweats everywhere. Ncube and the man also sweat. Rivers run down their faces. There is the smell of beer from the married couple and the man smells of dirt, bush and bad breath.

When the man finishes, he quickly stands up and runs back into the bush. The two remain lying on each other till Ncube pushes her off. There is coldness, chilliness. MaSiziba wonders whether she is dreaming. Could it be true? How could she be raped, with him right there? Why didn't he protect her, defend her?

There is silence as they both slowly stand up. Beat off the dust from their clothes. There is no talk. It is too hard for them to open their mouths, move their lips and tongues. Their mouths are dry like Shangani River. One needs to dig deep to find water. They walk away slowly, still in silence.

When they get home, their children notice something wrong. The two usually make a lot of noise with their singing and giggling, as if to announce their arrival. But there is silence. They are both angry with themselves, with each other. MaSiziba wonders why Ncube didn't come to her rescue and why he didn't resist. Is he a real man? Ncube's head is spinning. He is floating. Did she enjoy it? Why didn't she resist his moves? Could he be a boyfriend? They don't speak to each other but respond to their children's questions with short answers.

Ncube walks straight into their small blue bedroom and shuts the door. He takes off his clothes and attempts to sleep on their bed balanced on bricks. It's too hot, so he opens the small window to allow in fresh air. Mosquitoes enter and start buzzing around his ears. He slaps his face in an attempt to kill them. This makes him more furious and he slams the window. MaSiziba takes her time to tidy the house. She fixes the white doilies on her Rexene sofas and switches on her two plate hot stove to cook isitshwala. She serves this with the left over meat and vegetables from lunch. Ncube refuses to eat. He is too angry to put anything into his mouth.

Two weeks pass by. Nothing changes. MaSiziba decides to go and confide in Ncube's sister, who lives in Nkulumane. MaNcube is shocked. She advises her sister-in-law to turn to God. She is a member of Manyano, a churchwomen's association. She reads a few verses from the Bible for MaSiziba, who curses God in her mind for not coming to her rescue. MaNcube prays a long prayer. She breaks into song and praises God. After that the two remain silent. They look at each other and both cry. MaNcube then stands up and goes to the bathroom. She washes her face with cold tap water and then goes to the kitchen. She returns with a red and green floral tray, with two glasses, a bottle of Mazoe and an old Mazoe bottle with water. They have drinks and talk about the hot weather and their hope for rain.

On the same day, Ncube decides to go to the beer hall. He recognizes the man that has caused him so much pain, drinking and laughing. He watches until he is certain that this is the man. Ncube grabs the man from behind, toppling him from his bench, and tells everyone what this man did to him and MaSiziba. There is pandemonium. Beer is spilt everywhere. The other customers join in, meting out instant justice.

Ncube feels vindicated. A man.

MaSiziba sits at home, alone with her thoughts.

Our 'Notre Dame'

Deon Marcus

(looking from just below View of the World)

I always loved the feel of Matopos stone,
the soapy lichen-licked lolling baked and cooled
by a million nights and noons. I always loved the wind, its
spirit breath between the boulder blocks
weaving strange unearthly

forms. I always loved the stones, their grandeur
still and quiet, cathedral spired, their congregants no less
the sun and moon. I always loved the echoing, where your voice
could sound and touch where none in a hundred
years had seen, and yet

still feel the sanctity which this a place of worship
made. I always loved this place, here where the world is
lost and life is left alone, where minds surrender gravity and souls
are held in awe: the rest here found is not alone,
just safe, profound, enjoyed.

The Seekers

Bhekilizwe Dube

We sit on the railway line, the three of us, stoned. The iron is warm - it has been absorbing the sun's heat all day. Our feet are spread out before us on the gritty gravel, which is a fair mound, reinforcing the line. We stare down from the elevated line, at the township houses some distance away. A scraggy bush of stunted grey thorn trees and bleached, wispy grass separates the railway line from the township houses. From where we sit, Nketa Township sprawls in a northerly direction, spreading all the way to Phekiwe River. From across Phekiwe, Nkulumane Township extends all the way to Solusi Road in a relentless spread of an assortment of modest shabby bungalows. The railway line gleaming into the very horizon, cutting shy of Mganwini Township, in a westerly direction, all the way to Botswana, through Francistown, to Mafikeng in South Africa.

We pass the joint to each other, idly, blowing out smoke, staring ahead, the smoke from our mbanje drifting lethargically away from us and around us.

I know, in our solitude, we all wish we were elsewhere, we all wish too, to snake away, like the railway, to different worlds – to a different reality. Sadly, we waste away here. Our bodies, our minds, our hearts – vague zombies.

Somebody is playing God!
What nut is this, pray tell?
Somebody is playing God!
In this world? Fair Earth, which spins
Truly, along its path of orbit, a
Handsome hundred and eight thousand kilometres per second.
A hundred and eight thousand kilometres per second!

Somebody is playing God!
Hold! Hold! Hold! Fair person
In this universe; this living cosmos
Fair touching the infinite.

Somebody is playing God!
In this cosmos with its light, so light
Swooping through space, at an awesome,
Fair, three hundred thousand kilometres per second.

Somebody is playing God!
What lout is this?
Somebody is playing God!
What nut, pray, ere time champs it?

I burst out laughing. They start.
They stare at me bemused.
Abruptly, I quit laughing. It's not funny really.
Mthu hands me the joint.

I take it. I inhale. Sharply, rapidly. I pause, allow the smoke to seep
into the lungs.
Presently, I gradually allow it out in a thin wavy line.
I hand it to Thiza.

"What's funny?" Mthu is frowning.
Thiza smokes, seemingly indifferent.
"Talk tshomie." Mthu's whole frame is inclined towards me, his
sharp, penetrating eyes quizzical.
I shrug.
I caress my belly and chest. My small finger dips into the hollow of
my navel.
When it hits me, I always reach into my shirt, bottom up, and caress
myself.
I suppose that if Freud and Jung were to hear this humble confession,

they would write forbidding grey tomes dissecting it.

I smile torpidly.

“What?” Thiza asks.

He is stoned. He looks like a lion belly fed full of eland. He is a sated lion about to burp.

Suddenly I am laughing again. Deep, rumbling laughter, belly straining.

God, he looks so feline, really, and he looks like he is going to burp.

Tears sting my eyes, my belly heaves. Again and again, I laugh.

I am helpless. Helpless.

Laughter is infectious.

We are all laughing now, hard, desperately.

Laughing, stoned, sitting on the railway line, our bodies quivering muscles. We are in another world, our own world.

A pleasant one.

How many dogs have four ears?

How many snakes can climb stairs?

How many men can drink a hundred beers?

How many hate sex?

How many fish have chest hairs?

How many rats have had tea with cats?

How many stones have shed some tears?

How many fallen in love?

How many people know no fear?

This poem is stupid

But, who the hell cares?

We laugh even harder. I am gasping, choking for air. I may fall from the line being so weak now. I lunge into Mthu for support; my hands grasp his heaving shoulders. He tips precariously, my intrusive weight nearly pitching him forward. Thiza grabs him, steadies him, momentarily his howls of mirth checked. I am holding on weakly on to the line. Deep unfettered laughter always makes me feel weak. I

suppose that it makes most people weak. The most aggressive and violent person would be easy to subdue were they to be caught in a moment of overwhelming mirth.

“God that’s a stupid poem.” Thiza is wiping tears from his eyes. “Yeah, it’s so stupid it’s funny,” Mthu is amused. He stares ahead of him, eyes distant. He cannot see the township houses sprawling some distance before us, his eyes have a too distant and penetrating look. Perhaps he feels the wonder of laughing at so stupid and true a poem. Paradox.

David Blake wrote the poem. He’s sixteen; he is in my English class. He’s crazy.

The railway line is warm.

We are warm too.

The sun’s rays have lost their sting.

It’s close to sunset. They’ve lost all their midday passionate intensity. It’s been a long day. A good day. Those you laugh with deeply, your insides hurting, your eyes stinging with tears, those you share a joint with and placidly wait with, for the day’s end, they are your friends. They make your day good.

Peter the Great makes us laugh. When we feel really good, we often think back to his time and have a good laugh. He began his reign in Russia in 1696. He died in 1725. He did a lot for Russia, particularly in his attempt to westernise it. Among things he did, he set up a distinguished, magnificent Academy of Sciences. It is said that he found the traditional peasant manner of having long beards abhorrent. He then ordered all peasants with long beards to cut them. Naturally, there was resistance. The peasants were fond of this tradition. Their resistance did not faze Peter. He is said to have recruited, organised and stationed men with scissors at the gates of towns to carry out the operation on all who had defied him. Operation Beard Chop.

And the beards fell to the snip of the scissors. Imagining sinewy, stubborn peasant males, with calloused hands, coarse robes, coarse

speech and coarse ways, dragged by their beards and forcibly trimmed, while, perhaps, silently cursing Peter the Great and lamenting the passing of the old days when traditions were respected, is terribly funny. The imagining of this never ceases to make us laugh.

I walk to the wall
And what do I see?
A piece of glass standing before me.
I look outside and on the ground
And now I know my home is found.
This place called Zim is where I live
And at this rate it will be forever and a day.
There is a dog chewing a man,
He is whining like a scurvy baby.
A woman rushes along to help him,
Then tells the dog, please don't stop.

“David?”

“Yeah, he wrote that poem.”

Thiza shakes his head, “He is a bitter young man.”

“He is.” Mthu is frowning.

“He is.”

The sun has set. We make our way home. The township houses, mostly dull and ugly, house a depressed and troubled populace leading lives of bleak poverty and hopelessness. Tonight, many will go without food. Many will eat poor food.

Tonight, many will fight each other, some to the wee hours.

When people suffer the grind of poverty and oppression, tempers explode easily, nerves fray and depression sets in.

We are in the township now. The railway is gone. The gleaming iron must still lie as we left it, snaking its way to Botswana, Mafikeng, South Africa. Different worlds.

Some have left for Britain, America and Canada, some for South

Africa, Namibia and Botswana.

Leaving home. They are the lucky ones.

We have remained behind.

You should hear our minds scream.

Scream,

This is not Venus.

This is not Venus with its atmosphere

Of poisonous gases.

This is not Venus with its clouds, of droplets

Of concentrated sulphuric acid.

This is not Venus of flaring skies,

Skies vitriolic, flaming lightning, in every minute,

Some twenty times.

This is not Venus, of incessant, rumbling

Thunder!

Of bleak deserts

Of sweltering heat

Waterless, volcanic, restless.

Allow us a breath of sweet air.

Allow us heartbeats as light as

The kiss of dew on rose petals.

Allow us the thrill of joyful laughter,

The warm heaviness of full bellies,

The breath, light, warm, deeply moving

Of our children, as we kiss them,

In their innocent sleep.

Allow us the softness of our women,

Their husky voices, their wetness,

Their tremble in the profound

Embrace of love.

Allow us life.

Else we become, else we turn,
Raging and fiery Venus.
Spewing poison. Burning all in our way.

Allow us life.

*We walk in silence. Each person in solitude.
In the solitude of self, we walk on, seekers.*

The Girl with the Stolen Virginity

Mathew Chokuwenga

All the world had run away from her. Even her closest friend Chipu no longer wanted to be associated with her. Chipu only offered her company to this girl with the stolen virginity when the world had filled many eyes with darkness, when those with mouths that flies were afraid to walk into were busy snoring, if not passing rumours of the village to their tired, inattentive husbands, while they were still hot.

“It’s not her fault I know, it’s the women of the village who have told her to stop being my friend,” the girl with the stolen virginity thought. After her virginity had been stolen the world immediately rejected her. She was a tear squeezed out of a shutting eye that flows to drop to the dust, to disappear forever, to lose eternal contact with its source, the eye.

In a small hut she had slept with her grandmother from as early as the days of her first cry. That night her grandmother had stayed out very late drinking with those of her forgotten generation, that only had wrinkles for souvenirs.

It’s in this cold mute night, in which a drum beat sounded now and then over many hills, valleys and huts, from a far off village, that her virginity was stolen. It was so dark and the moon had not yet hatched. As it opened, the grass door swept the dry mud floor that cow dung coated.

“Grandmother is it you? Grandmother?” half asleep, she had questioned the person entering. “She is too drunk to answer,” she thought. “It’s funny, I never heard her sing from afar off as usual.” She shrugged her recumbent shoulders.

Later, after stealing her virginity, the thief left the small hut and darkness turned him into one of its own.

“You are lying. Why didn’t we hear you scream or shout for help?” the father of the girl with the stolen virginity roared, as he paced up

and down the round hut early the next morning. "We can't afford to let anyone hear that stupid, shameful story. I don't want to have all the men laugh at me at the beer. Where will I walk? Moreover I am a very respected man."

"She says she knows who did it," the mother cut in.

"Who?" the big man roared again.

"She says..."

"You shut up. Let her speak for herself, that's why she has a mouth," the big man fumed wearing a face of disgust.

"It i-i-it-it's..."

"Speak up," the father howled.

The mother wanted to tell the father to be gentle with their daughter, but feared she would get blows to her head, so she held her tongue that was craving to speak on behalf of the girl with the stolen virginity.

"It's Chipangu," she spoke slowly with a voice that was about to cry.

Immediately the father cut in, stopping the young girl from speaking.

"You filthy liar, how can you accuse the chief's son of doing such a thing? A decent young man like him. Woman, you better take your child to see sekuru. I think she has lost some of herself. She must be under the control of evil spirits."

The mother sat there silently, sure that her child had been robbed of her virginity. She could do nothing, powerless as a woman.

"Do you want us to be chased from this village?" he said, dropping his bearded face to the young woman. A face full of so much ugliness that it would frighten a baby. "Can you look after us? Can you? You stupid child. Why were you sleeping in that hut alone? Could you not go and sleep with your cousins Nyasha and Machivei? I don't want to hear this stupid story ever again." The father left, walking into the morning light that seemed to clear some of the darkness from his skin the moment it touched him.

The girl with the stolen virginity sat quietly, tears trickling from her lonely and lost eyes. She felt valueless. She blamed herself for

being a victim. She allowed suicide to come into her mind and tell her of its benefits. Her mother, sitting next to her, stretched her right hand over her sixteen year old child's small shoulders and squeezed her to herself. The mother's eyes slowly formed tears. And her tears spilt down her sad face. She took her other hand and placed its palm onto the child's palm and squeezed it tenderly.

"Don't cry, it will be fine," she whispered, trying hard to hide the cry behind her voice. For a while the two shared the pain of womanhood, that only their kind understand. Days came and went. The theft of the girl's virginity spread quickly through the village and flooded over mountains and down valleys to other villages.

The news reached the chief's ears. "You accusing my son. You tarnishing my son's name. Do you know you have tarnished my name as well? Do you know I can take your land and all your animals and send you to the police? How can you truly let your daughter say such dirty things of us? Do you know you have even angered the ancestors? Mocked at them."

These words caused the father of the girl with the stolen virginity to shiver and sweat, there on the ground where he sat.

"You must pay. I won't say with what."

The father of the girl with the stolen virginity sat beside the chief in the red soil, wilted like a tomato plant dying of thirst. His bigness had all disappeared under the humbleness and respect he was offering to the head of the village.

From the high wooden stool, the chief continued to baptise the big man with fear.

"Okay chief, I will send her off to a far off village and you shall never see her again. I am so sorry, so so sorry for besmirching your name and I will pay with these breathing cows." The father said these words, vigorously clapping his hands. "I am your servant, please forgive me. And may you ask the ancestors to forgive me."

Her only luggage being the blue dress she wore on her slim frame, she slowly walked away from the village. The village that had been her home all her life. To her uncle's village, mountains away, she headed.

No one had been allowed to accompany her, even Boki her dog. Slowly she disappeared into the distance. The father had spoken and there was nothing anyone could do for the child. After a while the horizon swallowed her.

Wim Boswinkel

Although situated in the landlocked province of Zimbabwe, the inhabitants of the sparkling city under a perpetual blue sky spent lots of time at Indian Ocean resorts. Several times a day, a climate-conditioned magnetic propelled passenger train left Bulawayo, to arrive within the hour in the coastal territory of Mozambique. There, for a while, the travellers could forget about oxygen production, water purification and energy collection, and instead enjoy the surf and super-fresh seafood during a well-deserved leave of absence.

John was seated with his parents in a family compartment of the train. These cubicles were all identical, as every family was the same size, nowadays: three persons. That Chinese demand had been adopted, even before the move of the seat of the World Government from New York to Hong Kong.

As a seventeen year old, John had recently matriculated and would begin studying history after these very holidays. Old books had always fascinated him, even from as far back as the second half of the twentieth century; their contents had stimulated his interest for the Dark Age. He was looking forward to researching the past, also to get a better understanding of the present Light Age.

They had spent a marvellous time at the beach and were now returning home. John enjoyed speeding through the African bush, which had recovered so magnificently after almost two centuries of mistreatment. It was teeming again with wildlife and covered by lush vegetation, producing all the pure water and clean air that was needed.

The SAYP-screen in the compartment was showing pictures of features of interest along the railway line; he had programmed it to concentrate on archaeological topics and a large selection of images, reflecting the distant past, flicked by. There were graveyards, sites of both primitive and industrial mining, and many indications that intensive farming had once been the main land-use in the surrounding countryside.

Bulawayo wasn't far and neither was Nomakha. They had agreed to meet at the ancient museum, a round building that must have been constructed about 150 years ago. Centuries old trees surrounded it, with many more forest giants growing in the area to the west, the remnants of a park from a long time past. John and Nomakha regularly spent time in the area. They loved to roam through the dense vegetation, to dig with their hands into the moist soil and bring some of it up to their noses to inhale the fragrant aroma of the decomposing top layer. It made them feel part of nature, as once mankind had been, in long forgotten primitive days. It stimulated suppressed instincts; it momentarily diminished some of the effects of the XK-ing of humans over the last half a century. Then it would not be long before the soil dropped from their hands, which found each other as their lips would, and a short time later they were engaged in an act that, they had learned, animals performed to produce offspring. Maybe, one day, if approved by the Council, they would be allowed a child too. It would even look like them, although, with each generation, distinctions between children were diminishing.

Afterwards, holding hands, they walked back towards the old museum. They passed by Demons Acre, an open section, where over a dozen statues were assembled. They represented despots from the Dark Age; a few of these giant sculptures had once graced some of Bulawayo's major thoroughfares. These evil images served as reminders of a miserable past and as a warning of what could be if the principles of the Light Age were no longer adhered to.

Some statues were easily recognized by the two teens. The sturdy figure at the edge could only be that greedy empire builder, after whom this territory had once been named. And a little to the left of him stood the fat tyrannical king who had so cruelly terrorized neighbouring tribes. John immediately recognized the statue placed prominently in the centre of the field as Hitler: the moustache gave him away. But coming closer, he realized his mistake: the Führer had never worn glasses.

Three months earlier, John had joined the other grade-16ers for their

end of school camp. Since their second year of life, they had learned and lived together; soon they would each go their own way. Away from Bulawayo and its protected environment, he had had the opportunity to explore the sun-scourged bush and look for historical clues. They were plentiful: ruins of farmhouses, overgrown by creepers and offering shelter to giant cobras and treacherous puff adders; remains of roads, those erosion-prone strips of land that had been utilized before the days of magnetic transport.

All over the place, there were still heavily rusted poles to be found, which once had marked boundaries between properties. These reminded John of that period, just a few generations ago, when there had been wars over the land, between people of different races.

He wasn't quite sure who had won. It had been the Dark Age; whites had taken from blacks and sometimes the other way round. It seemed so irrelevant, now that all land was conserved as the guarantor of mankind's survival.

And anyhow, all people in the present age were of the same, soft, light brown colour. A combination of multiracial mixing and genetic manipulation had done the trick, as the XK-procedure had been perfected. People had all become equal.

At night, in the tents, the kids had talked about those olden days. They had some vague recollection of terms like 'independence', 'colonies' and 'indigenous cultures', but they couldn't remember their sequence or much of their relevance. It didn't matter anyway; gone forever was that ugly primitive era, in which mankind had suffered from hunger, ignorance, disease and, above all, injustice.

Wise and just men, with the powers that were at their disposal, had cleverly combined western technology and philosophy with eastern commonsense on disciplinary matters to develop the Principles of the Light Age. Implementation had been a relatively simple matter of combining conviction with biological manipulation. It had resulted in the XK-procedure, which had transformed every aspect of human society.

There were now no unscrupulous tyrants, who, in order to overcome their inferiority complexes and to hide their incompetence,

had loudly bullied the population at large. Gone were the ideologists and prophets who tried to overcome their own doubts and insecurities by indoctrinating an ignorant populace.

Within one generation, terrorism and crime had disappeared from the face of the earth, as had superstition and prejudice. The many centuries of confusion caused by the contradictions between such writings as the Ten Commandments, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Plato's Utopia, the Five Pillars of Islam, the laws of Montesquieu and the teachings of Buddha and Confucius, were effectively ended.

At the same time, all over the world, constitutions and many an idealistic 'declaration of independence' had been sent into oblivion, together with the so-called Rule of Law, which had protected a few fortunate individuals to the detriment of the suffering masses of the planet.

It had been a terrific week for all of them. It was good for body and spirit to be exposed to nature's elements, to suffer cold and heat, to get soaked by rain and rivers and to breathe untreated air.

By the time they returned to the clima-dome protected city, the youngsters were ready to take up their specialized studies.

The famous Victoria Falls thundered as never before and the cloud of wet smoke above it reached record heights, as the water inflow into the mighty Zambezi had benefited greatly from the conservation and climate control measures. Together with the production of solar energy, it had become the basis of the province's prosperity.

Zimbabwe produced large quantities of pure water and clean air for the disadvantaged territories in the world's northern hemisphere, where the effects of nuclear radiation had finally started to wear off. It would not be long now before Europe and North America could shed the last effects of the terrible consequences of the conflicts that had taken place in the last decade of the Dark Age. More and more people had settled there in recent times and most of the food they produced these days was certified fit for human consumption.

John and Nomakha were soaked. The dense rainforest in which

they walked was being cooled down by the spray of the Falls. It made their task lighter and more pleasant, which was a good thing, as John's assignment was not an easy one. But if accomplished, he would be a qualified historian, as he had already passed the theoretical exams.

Slowly they progressed through the lush vegetation. The feeling of tension was high. Would it still be there and would they be able to find it? John walked in front. They were both very aware of the privilege of being allowed in this restricted area, where no human being had set foot for generations. They were now close to the Devil's Cataract, John concluded from his map; the sound was deafening.

"Maybe a bit more to the right," Nomakha called out from the back. It was so nice to be able to converse in English again; at this lonely place nobody or nothing would notice it; there would be no sanctions. Last year, Mandarin had been decreed to be the Earth's only permissible language and, although the western alphabet had been maintained, it was still quite a burden for many people. But no one would question a decision of the World Government.

They spent that whole day and most of the following one on their quest. Finally they were rewarded; cutting their way through a maze of thorny vines, they suddenly stood in front of it. It was a massive entity; completely overgrown by vegetation, but as impressive as John had expected it to be. It took them a few hours to clean some of the pedestal and, when the plaque became readable, they had definite confirmation that they had found their man.

Once removed from this site, the statue would not make the most evil exhibit at Demons Acre, but certainly deserved its place there for all the confusion and suffering its original had caused by promoting superstition and subjugation.

The graduation party had been great. Half of Bulawayo seemed to be there. The food was exquisite, the drinks were delicious; but something felt amiss as the conversation was held back a little by language limitations.

Afterwards, in bed, John, as an historian, couldn't help thinking that this problem didn't exist in the Dark Age and speculated for a

moment how the happening that evening compared with a party in this town, say eighty years ago. But he was sufficiently XK-ed to set these thoughts aside almost immediately.

Naturally, the savages of those days, in all their shapes and colours, would have been eating roasted flesh, while increasing their thirst with intoxicating chemicals. They could speak any language they desired, but what use would these crude exchanges have been, coming from people who were ignorant of the real values of life.

Thank God for the Light Age, he thought.

And while moving closer to Nomakha, he chuckled, as he realized how old expressions persisted, even long after they had lost most of their meaning.

The Messenger's Finger

John S. Read

I arrived quiet in the modesty of my destination.
Smoke lay asleep, across simple thatch cells
incubating in a warmth of habitation.
I listened, wet from the cold dew path,
answered only by the morning fowls.
Until a door flung francolin flying girls out in expectation.
Suddenly struck still in flight before my pale image.
An outsider assessed by an angry dog
held the uncertainty of the moment.
When behind them the hiatus broke
with a mother's maize-white smile,
bright and warm as the fire behind her.

That random path, capricious in its direction,
Had brought me here with the night's dark phrase.
Carried by the insistent bell
that now needed my interpretation.
Seated in a circle, gracious in their patience
for the message held.
Silent in our laps we wept together for the son
Who had passed in deep darkness
for the Midas-gold my finger holds.

My Meat!

Christopher Mlalazi

He stood at the braai stand behind Emakhandeni Bottle Store, a quart of beer held in his left hand. In the right hand he held a sharp sliver of wood, which he used to turn the sizzling slab of meat on the braai stand, which, uncannily, was the size and shape of his long sloping camel-like face.

This morning Zama was drinking beer, and whenever Zama drinks beer, which is as infrequent for him as rain in drought prone Tsholotsho, his eyeballs bulge from their sockets, as if something is choking him, and his cheeks shine, as if from an overdose of Vaseline.

He poked the meat with the sliver of wood – the meat sizzled furiously – and he turned it over.

Then he jabbed a piece of meat-fat nearby, and slapped it all over the meat, oiling it. He brought the beer bottle to his mouth and drank from it - and choked as the beer went down his throat the wrong way. He coughed until tears came to his eyes. Snot ballooned in his right nostril, and he closed the other nostril with a finger, and blew his nose at the ground. He wiped the nose with the back of his hand, and wiped the hand on the seat of his trousers. Then he coughed deeply and swallowed.

A stray mangy dog represented the sole spectatorship at the braai stand. It stood a short distance away from Zama, ears cocked, watching him with an intense fixed stare, as if in disbelief at what it was seeing this morning at the braai stand – Zama braaiing meat and drinking a quart of beer! Impossible!

It was a Thursday morning, overcast and chilly, an odd time of the day for drinking beer and braaiing meat. But Zama is one of those odd township characters you pass everyday, drinking masese behind the bottle store when you are off to work, and who is still drinking masese as you pass by the shops at sunset, when you come back from work, and who then greet you with a drunken plastic smile and an – “Eh Bra! Buy one for a loafer!”

Zama looked sharply towards the township houses. A figure in dark overalls was approaching him unerringly from that direction.

Zama quickly and slyly grabbed the hot slab of meat on the braai stand and, his fingers burning, he slipped it into his right jacket pocket. He brought his burnt fingers up to his mouth and sucked on them in pain. He picked up the sliver of wood and jabbed the meat-fat and pretended to be turning it over.

The approaching figure in the dark overalls got nearer. It was Nsingo.

Nsingo took one look at the bottle of beer in Zama's hand and exclaimed in surprise, "Ah! You are drinking beer!"

"What did you think I was drinking?" Zama asked him. "Do you think this is water?" He sneered, deliberately took a sip from the bottle, and smacked his lips.

"God is amazing!" Nsingo still could not believe what he was seeing. His mouth wide open, he clapped his hands together in applause. "You!"

Zama drank from the beer again. "Shef!" He exulted in a low voice. "Big shot!" He raised his beer against the sky, glanced at its contents, it was half full, then drank from it again.

"Buy me one too shef?" Nsingo asked, his head inclined in plea.

"A fool and his money are soon parted," Zama replied. He held the beer bottle between his legs, then, using both hands, he took the sizzling meat-fat from the braai and broke off a piece. The dog looked at his hands expectantly.

Zama brought the piece up to his mouth. The dog, whining softly, followed the move of his hand with its head and eyes. Zama looked up, opened his mouth wide, and dropped the piece of fat into it. The dog barked sharply once at him. Zama licked his lips. The dog also licked its lips with a long tongue.

"You should have braaied meat if you have money." Nsingo advised, licking his lips.

"I have already eaten it. Twenty thousand dollars worth. I gave a little to that dog." Zama pointed at the dog with the beer bottle. "Ask it, it will tell you." He chuckled, as if to himself.

“Don’t tell me!”

Zama pointed at the dog again. The dog’s brow furrowed as if in query. “That’s why it is looking at me like that.”

The dog shook its head, and there was the sound of its ears slapping. Zama laughed briefly.

“Mmh!” Nsingo grunted in admiration, his face suddenly bright.

“All alone too.” Zama repeated, smiling broadly, and one hand lightly brushing his lean stomach. The hand brushed over the piece of meat in the jacket pocket.

Nsingo’s eyes shifted to the visible bulge in the jacket pocket.

“Your pocket is full,” he commented, his eyes still on the bulge.

“Money,” Zama replied, his eyes hooded. “Big time.”

The dog came nearer, its nose extended towards the bulge in the jacket pocket.

“But Zama my friend, you are unfair. You know I am also unemployed like you, and we always drink amasese together every morning, if we have money, but when you go to make deals, you leave your dear friend behind.”

“Each man for himself.” The meat was becoming uncomfortably warm against Zama’s side. “Very soon I will be drinking quarts only, and changing friends too.”

He looked Nsingo straight in the eyes, then looked down at the ground in a blank stare. “People who drink masese and hotstuff are so troublesome, always asking and asking and asking.”

He moved his hand over his jacket pocket as he was speaking, and slyly shifted the meat, which was now unbearably hot against his side.

The dog’s eyes were fixed on the jacket pocket.

“Please include me in your deals Zama bra.”

Zama shook his head and pointed his beer at Nsingo. “You will die in jail Ah! Ah! Nc.”

Suddenly, the dog, at lightning speed, leapt at Zama’s jacket pocket. Nsingo screamed. “Basop!”

The dog grabbed the piece of meat, which had been exposed by Zama trying to shift it, and it streaked away, the meat dangling from its mouth.

Zama swore. He threw the beer bottle at the fleeing dog. The bottle missed the dog and exploded against a stone. Zama, the tails of his jacket flying behind him, raced after the fleeing dog. Both the dog and the man disappeared down the street between the rows of township houses.

Nsingo stood open mouthed by the braai stand. He clapped his hands in amazement.

A man appeared around the corner of the bottle store. He was smartly dressed in designer jeans, sneakers and sweater. He carried a beer bottle in his hand. He came to the braai stand.

“Bra Marx!” Nsingo greeted him. “You are around? When did you come?”

Bra Marx worked in South Africa and, whenever he was around, beer flowed at the bottle store.

“Eita!” Marx replied. “I came last night. I left that fool Zama here braaiing my meat. Where has he gone to now – I shouldn’t have bought him that beer.”

Nsingo burst out laughing and pointed at the street between the houses that Zama had disappeared into chasing the dog.

Then, between laughter, he related what had happened to Marx.

A few minutes later he was holding a full bottle of beer, and braaiing a large sausage. Marx had gone to the phone box in front of the bottle store to phone his girl friend in South Africa again....

Amainini Wendy

Tinashe Mushakavanhu

Amainini Wendy died.

Thoughts of attending the funeral weighed heavily on my mind. I had never attended a funeral before. My parents, being the protective type, have always tried to shelter me from the pain and sadness of funerals. And this was going to be my first time. I had strongly protested against the decision, but Baba's words had made an impression, "You can't be a child forever, Moscow." I was afraid that I would feel out of place and worse still, I didn't know the appropriate discourse to use to console the bereaved family and the multitude of relatives, nor did I know the appropriate dress code. I just had to be present as the eldest son, to represent my father who had to be away on urgent business.

Amainini Wendy.

The last time I saw Amainini Wendy, I was terrified. She looked so thin, like the skeleton diagrams in the biology textbooks I used in high school. The once robust aunt laboriously came into the dining room. I remember, she sat on the sofa to my right. Her red lips barely moving to acknowledge my presence. Her watery eyes rolling in their sockets like those of a doll. I sat there, stiff and robotic with fear, staring at death lurking inches away from me. I could hear Amainini Wendy's strenuous breathing like the whistling of a steaming boiler. Her skin had turned grey and rutted. Amainini Wendy coughed, spitting a thick red substance on her blue towel that hung limply on her twig legs. She coughed again and closed her eyes. She looked so small, so fragile, like a bird. I looked away as bile rose to my throat. Amainini Wendy was sick.

Amainini Wendy's funeral.

As I approached the house, my heart skipped and I became nervous as I tried to adjust my face into a sorrowful expression, dreading the ritual of shaking hands with everyone. I could hear the sad music of

church hymns uniting into notes of sorrow. People spilled out of the tiny green house at the corner of 123rd Close, in Glen View, into the small yard and onto the dusty road. Parked by the gate, I recognized Aunt Farina's four wheel drive and the other cars that were untidily parked everywhere. The narrow street suddenly became a cul-de-sac: pick up trucks, Mazda 323's, army trucks, kombis. Many people came to mourn Amainini Wendy. The men sat outside. Some sat on the blue sofas that were arranged in a half moon shape under the big mango tree at the front of the house. Others sat haphazardly, on old tins, old crates and stray bricks and stones. Young children ran around, shouting and unconcerned with the grieving. For them life goes on.

The father of the deceased looked haggard and tired and old. Tears wet his eyes. He did not wipe them away. Sekuru Shelton was just as distraught. His sister's death had shaken him. He sat still on the ground, pondering on God knows what. After shaking hands with everybody outside, I made my way into the house, shaking hands with the grieving women, who sat lined up against the walls as if keeping vigil for the second coming of Christ. The exhausted mother of the deceased lay in a corner, propped up with pillows and flanked by close female relatives. She offered her hand listlessly and began wailing uncontrollably. I was taken aback. I didn't know how to react to this sudden burst of pain. I had heard of people making scenes at funerals. I didn't know until after the next episode that I created the biggest scene. The wailing of the mother of the deceased continued, getting louder, and was joined in by her sisters. Since I didn't know what to do, I too let out a long screaming wail and willingly collapsed on the sitting women, causing pandemonium. My face became plastered with tears and mucus. Two men had to be summoned from outside to carry me out of the house. Sitting outside, wiping my face, I became embarrassed by the scene I had just caused.

Would Amainini Wendy have felt embarrassed by this show of emotion? I then sat on a dry log watching the drama unfold as people came in and out. The women cooked on the fire, talking and laughing. Spirals of smoke rose in the hot afternoon air. My mother was part of the group. I could see her face glistening with sweat, her clenched fists

resting on her hips. Two big drums were on the makeshift hearth; one contained simmering sadza and the other bubbled with meat and shreds of cabbage. I felt sick at the sight of meat. I began to see Amainini Wendy burning, yelling for people to stop her torture in the hot hell. The women finished the cooking. I refused to eat because I didn't want to feast on poor Amainini Wendy. Mbuya Makaita came to me, calling my name, smiling, saying eat, Moscow eat and she held out a plate full of sadza and chunks of Amainini Wendy. I just sat there blank, staring at her. And then it was Amainini Wendy herself, smiling and saying eat, Moscow eat. Her face melted and became a small fire under two big drums. At this point I decided never to eat meat again.

Why Amainini Wendy?

A distant aunt from the rural areas laden with a black travelling bag started wailing several yards away, chanting through sobs, "Wadarirei kutirwadzisa nhai Wendy mwana wehanzvadzi yangu..." She collapsed on the ground, picked herself up, and collapsed again. The second time she rolled, tearing her hair and clothes. Two women rushed and covered her with their colourful zambias.

The men did not cry for Amainini Wendy. I saw Muzukuru Kenny and Tsano Taurai come with a yellow 25 litre container of maseke for the men. I thought the men were selfish, to drink beer at Amainini Wendy's funeral. Was beer meant to encourage them to forget the sad reality of Amainini Wendy's death? Was beer a way for men to stoically conceal their pain, their emotions, their weakness? Sekuru Benias took great pleasure in the yellow container, as did the majority of the young male relatives who began to run around with cups sizzling with the frothy stuff. I looked away.

And there was my cousin Nyasha wearing a tiny black dress, hardly enough to cover her thighs. She was self-conscious though, constantly stretching it downwards or clasping her hands behind her buttocks to prevent the dress from riding up to reveal her red knickers. What is it with today's youth? Catching me examining her, she smiled slightly and, embarrassed, looked away.

At the cemetery.

The cavalcade of motor vehicles progressed to Granville Cemetery, distressingly slowly. In front of the line was the Doves Morgan hearse, large and impressive, all sparkling polished metal, carrying Amainini Wendy's body in the white coffin with gold handles. As we entered the cemetery gate, hawkers livened, enticingly placing their boxes with freezits and maputi before the tired mourners. I was surprised. I thought cemeteries were sacred places. But then, shouldn't the living make a living and the dead be left to the dead? The procession moved. Varoora danced, skirts swirling, bottoms jutting, carpeting the road leading towards the freshly dug grave with their zambias, demanding payment of some sort.

Granville Cemetery is a large cemetery. I could see the sea of tombstones gleaming in the hot afternoon sun. Huge crosses towering over smaller ones. Here and there lay an old pot or rust eaten domestic utensil, a last hapless link with the living world. The only smell detectable was of freshly dug earth.

Amainini Wendy laid to rest.

The Methodist preacher, Reverend Mwanjali, gave a sermon at the graveside. Pity. The man of God tried to negotiate an angelic path for the dearly departed Amainini Wendy to meet her creator. But what good is it if the deceased failed to know God when she was alive; what makes the preacher think he can persuade God otherwise? He talked about a region called heaven, higher above. I wonder if Amainini Wendy went to that place with all those men who visited her, especially Uncle Thomas, the one with the sleek silver Mercedes Benz. Uncle James was nice too.

Epitaph

Amainini Wendy died of AIDS. Born on 3 February 1981, she died young. Only 23. She has left behind a 3 year old orphan, Kurauone. The father of the child is unknown. And the cars have stopped coming to the tiny green house at the corner of 123rd Close.

My Hood

Mthandazo Mahlangu - Mhlangu

Come to it after sunset and you think you have just come to a ghost city. No lights can be seen from afar because they are either paraffin lamps or candles. Almost unnoticeable at this time, a lone shack, or baghdad, stands out of line with the houses and from it no light shines, save for the faint glow of Jonasi's cigarette. The ghost city is no ghost city at all, but a very much alive township with all sorts of happenings going on. That is my hood. Emganwini township in Bulawayo.

Houses in all stages of development, finished, semi-finished, starting, or just waiting for the next stage, have sprouted all over. Most of them are in use. In cases of the semi-finished you see all kinds of improvisations. Canvas bags on the rafters for the roof, sacks or plastic bags on the windows and doors completely blocked off by bricks. All these are temporary, the owners are proud of one thing: the houses belong to them. The pride of the new owners is enough to dispel any gloom that might be hanging around their environment. All talk of having got fed up with landlords. Staying in someone's house becomes difficult when one has a promise of one's own place. It gets worse when the landlord learns that the tenant is building; the rent keeps going up. I don't know whether this is done to thwart the tenant's efforts in building or is just money grabbing.

Here you find a lot of 'pull him down' kind of builders and guards. Not all would-be residents live close to their stands. So, they hire guards to look after their building materials. Then, the builder and the guard connive and building materials develop feet and disappear. The poor house-owner ends up paying many times the original price. Those are opportunists for you.

My neighbour, Jonasi, from the shack, who acts as the neighbourhood watch, will tell you all the woes that befall house-owners as they battle with building during these hard times. He tells of 'Njiva', someone working in Johannesburg - Egoli, who chased his builder around the township wielding a gun after he had noticed that

he was being cheated. And, of course, everyone ends up trusting people like my neighbour Jonasi if they don't want to be swindled by the builders.

Half of the life here is urban and the other half rural, complete with cows, donkeys, sheep and goats. One thing for certain is that our children will never mistake a goat for a dog and they will always know that milk does not just come from a sachet.

On the other hand, livestock are bad news for our gardens. The donkeys can cause havoc during the night. Some opportunists take advantage and blame missing vegetables on the donkeys.

Our neighbours, the smallholder plot owners, complain that their animals are disappearing at an alarming rate. I find that not surprising at all with thieves hovering around and a flourishing abattoir in their midst. The plot holders then buy meat from the local butcheries, that may well have come from their own beast. These neighbours are very handy; they provide us with a variety of goods at very reasonable prices. You get green vegetables fresh from the garden, fruits fresh from the tree, eggs fresh from the hen and milk fresh from the cow. Jonasi will tell you where to get all the best bargains. He will also tell you the short cuts to each of the plots.

He knows an amazing amount about the plot owners. You wonder how he manages to socialise on such a large scale and still manage to guard peoples' building materials.

For people of a gregarious nature, Emganwini might seem intolerably lonely. The place is admittedly quiet. Nothing much happens as there is no electricity. When you have a party, you sing for yourself, dance with your shadow and laugh with the sun. At first the railway line and road are fascinating, you can spend an afternoon watching the trains go by and counting the number of carriages they are pulling. You can also count the cars that pass on the road, categorising them according to colour or size. You can even battle to count the wheels on the heavy trucks. The road, being a busy road, might keep you enthralled for a while. Regrettably, this pales with time and you go back to the loneliness of the place.

When I first came here I could ward off the loneliness with my

solar radio. It had a handle at the back that you could wind to get the radio going. The problem was that if you did not wind it for long enough then the radio would cut out at the most interesting bit of the programme. You miss out and silence takes over. Such hassle could be solved during the day by connecting the small solar panel to the radio so that you did not have to wind it. Jonasi marvelled at my radio. He would come to listen to soccer matches and have a good time winding the radio whenever it fell silent. This radio was my prized possession, my best friend, because it could work without a battery or electricity. Unfortunately, I was not the only one who thought it was worth having in our neighbourhood. One day, my radio fell prey to the thieving fingers of an opportunist.

My suspect, when the police asked me, was my neighbour, Jonasi, who had been taking care of my building materials. Why? After the disappearance of the radio, he was never the same. He avoided me. Not only that, folks around here have eyes and ears; they have a way of whispering loud so that the truth is blown by the wind to your ears, as the smell of onion to your nose.

I appealed and persuaded the police officer to help me recover my radio. Fortunately, the young officer handling my case was still enthusiastic about his job. I suppose he still had an eye on the higher rungs of his career ladder. He was willing to help and in the proper way. He managed to get a search warrant for the particular dwelling of my suspect. There was some sort of security around the shanty dwelling that my suspect claimed was to alert him of any intruders. The doorway was closed by a flap and you had to bow down to enter. Jonasi and the constable went into the dwelling. After a few minutes, the police officer came out triumphantly carrying a radio. It was not mine. He returned to his search. Over the next ten minutes he brought out radios of every description, mostly dismantled. All turned out not to be mine.

As I waited there, I detected a terrible stench coming from inside. It was as if there was something rotting. When I was still wondering what that could be, I heard the officer exclaiming loudly. I rushed to the doorway thinking he had found my radio; to my amazement, he

had uncovered, under a pile of laundry and a heavy coat, the butchered carcass of a jersey calf. Its bulging lifeless eyes and protruding tongue told the story of the struggle and violence of its death. This sickening sight momentarily made me forget my own loss.

I stood there, outraged. I had a strong feeling this was the same calf I had seen just the previous week in one of the plots where I had gone to look for milk. Now, here it was, dead. Neighbours might have got a few cheap cuts of beef, but this calf could have grown to provide us with milk for years.

Jonasi went with the police, but within a week he was out. Soon after, he left. His baghdad was dismantled and, the last I heard, he was living in the resettlements nearby. Quite a number of people who had left their materials with him had the shock of their lives when they came and found him, and their materials, gone. I am convinced my radio is being played these days wherever he is.

One for the Road

Godfrey M. Sibanda

Four hundred kilometres from Bulawayo, the bus stopped. In the red setting sun, I could see some mud huts next to a brown maize field. As the bus picked up speed again, two hand-waving kids faded from sight.

The girl who came down the aisle of the bus wore a sleeveless dress that looked dirty on the side facing the sun. She came and sat by my side. She smelled of sweat and cheap soap.

“Salibonani,” she greeted me.

“Yebo, my child.”

“What made the bus come so late?”

“We ran into a zebra a short distance back.”

“My God! Was anyone hurt?”

“The zebra died.”

After a moment of droning silence, she spoke again.

“Are you going far, sir?”

“I’m going to Bulawayo.”

“That’s where I’m headed as well.”

“Fine,” I said. I put on my reading glasses and opened the novel on my knees.

“You mean you can’t see without those?”

“I am old, my child. My eyes need help to see.”

“Would it be rude of me to... ask your age, sir?”

“That would be a capital sin, my child. But I’ll tell you anyway. I am... fifty.”

Her eyes fell on my hands and stayed there for some time. The joints of my fingers were wrinkled with age and fatigue.

“You look a bit older than that, sir.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“I’m very sorry, sir. I didn’t mean...”

“What exactly did you mean?”

“I’m very sorry, sir. You see, I’ve just come from burying my

grandfather...”

“And what has that to do with me? Do I look as dead as he was?”

She did not answer. From the corner of my eye, I saw a solitary tear course down her cheek. I looked at the book on my knees, but none of the words made any sense. Now she was quietly sobbing. Silly little child! I held on to the book for the next thirty kilometres but did not turn a single page, and I’m no slow reader. Finally, with the sound of her sobs finally over and my indignation gone, I told myself I had been a bit too harsh with her: maybe she had loved her Grandpa and I reminded her of him.

“I’m sorry about your grandfather.”

“He was a fine old man.”

“How old are you, my child?”

She beamed a smile at me. Her teeth were like a rabbit’s, but she looked good to me. As you grow older, faces seem to lose their hard, cutting edges.

“I am nineteen, sir.”

“You look much younger than that.”

“Men usually say so.”

“Really? Do men usually ask your age?”

“In my profession, they do.”

“What profession is that, where men ask your age?”

“I am a prostitute.”

I thought I had misheard her. I turned bodily to face her, but her hard uncorseted left breast stood in the way. In the half-light and the droning bus and the blackening sky beyond the hills, I could sense that yes, here was a true, breathing prostitute.

“Listen, my child. There are some things you shouldn’t be so brazen about.”

“You asked me a question and I answered it as truthfully as I could. I am an honest girl.”

“A certain man was nailed to the cross for being honest. And they say he was the Son of God.”

“I am a daughter of God, too. We all are sons and daughters of the Lord. You know, you remind me of a priest at the church in my

village. I always tell him all my sins.”

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned. I slept with a hundred men,” I said, mimicking her voice.

Her body stiffened against mine.

“I’m sorry I said that, my child.”

“Your tongue is full of thorns, sir.”

“I did not mean to hurt you, my child.”

“I forgive you, provided you tell me your proper age.”

“I’m sixty-five,” I lied again.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I own a small business in Bulawayo.”

“Where in Bulawayo do you stay?”

“Riverside.”

“That’s a posh suburb. Who do you stay with?”

“You ask too many questions, my child. You should have been a policewoman.”

The girl leaned her head against my shoulder.

“Riverside. That really is a fine place.”

“I’m a fine old man.”

“You’re a fine man, but not old at all.”

Her voice sounded very sleepy. Soon, she was purring softly and her heart was beating against the back of my arm.

She’s right - I’m not old at all. I can still hop and skip and score fabulous goals and run a hundred metres in ten seconds. All this and more I can do - with my mind. But my seventy year old body - well, it’s just a body. Who needs a body? I don’t need a body. I am a bodiless old man. We are eternal in mind. Lying there in the shadows near the back seat of the bus with the young prostitute leaning against my right side, I knew a body counted for nothing...

Someone was shaking my shoulder. The bus lights were on. It was the girl.

“We’re in Hwange. The bus has engine problems or something. They say it’ll take an hour to sort it out. Let’s go for a drink. And

don't leave your stuff behind."

I stood up, picked up my bag and followed her. Outside, the air was warm and smelled of burning coal.

Vendors of roasted maize and bananas and cigarettes and digital watches and freezits and other trinkets milled near the door of the bus, shouting out their wares. We pushed our way through the throng and entered a small restaurant. We sat down at a table at the back and I ordered two plates of pap-and-chicken.

We washed our hands and ate; the food was good. After we had finished eating, we washed our hands, settled the bill and the girl asked a waiter if they sold any beer.

"No, we don't, but I can get some for you next door."

"Please. What do you drink?" she asked me.

"A Shake-shake will be fine for me, thanks."

"Get two Shake-shakes for the gentleman and six Lions for me, then."

She gave the waiter some money and he hurried off. I asked the girl if she wasn't a bit too young for that much beer?

"I'm nineteen, and I'm paying."

"What about your bladder? These chicken buses rarely have a toilet stop."

"I can down half a crate without visiting the loo," she boasted. She was a child, after all.

When the beers came, I asked what her name was.

"It's Luba. Lubalenkosi, actually."

"Flower of the King". It was a beautiful Zulu name.

"That's a good name. I thought ladies in your profession all had names like Roxanne or Candy."

"Those are just... imported stage names. We are actresses of a sort."

"You sound too cultured to be a prostitute."

"Do I? Does that mean you've had lots of... contact with girls in my field?"

"Only once. Decades before you were born. There was no AIDS, then."

“Did you enjoy it?”

“You don’t enjoy such things. You just huff and puff, and then pay.”

“You’ll love it with me, I promise.”

“You’re taking too much for granted, Luba.”

“All men want sex.”

“I’m not just any man. I’m old and very, very wise.”

“I’ll transform you into something young and very, very silly.”

That made me laugh. Suddenly, I realised that I hadn’t laughed for a very long time.

“You’ve been watching too many silly American movies, Luba. C’mon, drink your beer and stop saying naughty things or I’ll spank your bottom so hard you won’t sit for a week.”

It was her turn to laugh. She seemed to enjoy the prospect of being spanked on the bottom.

We drank more beer and as the minutes passed, we conversed and argued in a beery fashion about politics, prostitution, football, books, movies, music, and other topics until someone came into the restaurant and announced that the bus would be leaving in five minutes time. Luba downed her last Lion and asked the waiter to go and change the empties for her. I was still halfway through the second Shake-shake. When the money from her empties came, she rose to her feet; her drunken face as radiant as a little veldt flower in bloom. God, how pretty she was! She stretched her arms wide, outlining her two solid breasts against her thin cotton dress. I almost choked on my beer. The blood pounded in my head as I realised that Luba’s young heart would be pulsating against my ancient skin for the next 334 kilometres. Would my ancient heart withstand a 334-kilometre erection?

“Time to stand up, sir,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Luba, I... I think I’ll stay in Hwange for the night. You see, I have a heart problem. A bus ride after so much beer would definitely kill me. I’ll go find a hotel to spend the night.”

“Try the Baobab Hotel,” she said.

“Is it a good place?”

“It’s superb. Let me go get a taxi.”

“Luba, I’d rather go alone.”

Her smile instantly vanished.

“I thought we’d reached an understanding, sir.”

“You’re a really nice kid, Luba. But I’m too old for that kind of thing.”

“Are you telling me to fuck off?”

“No, not at all. We can meet in Bulawayo. Tomorrow afternoon....”

The bus honked outside.

“Do you really want to see me again?”

“Quite definitely yes, Luba.”

“OK. Tomorrow at noon. Under the City Hall clock.”

She bent towards me and brushed her lips against mine before running out of the restaurant. I heard the bus honk again, and then it roared away.

Afterwards, I drank my beer for long, thoughtless minutes. I imagined I could sense Luba’s ghost whispering to me from across the table. I could smell it, hear its youthful laugh, see the contour of its breasts beneath its phantasmal cotton dress. Luba’s ghost conversed with me as I strode out of the restaurant, it sat on my right side when I caught the next bus to Bulawayo, it was with me all the way to my cold sheets later that night.

Next morning, at about ten, I dressed carefully and slowly, and emptied one Shake-shake, for the road. Outside, the sky was overcast and it was drizzling. One of those handsome Bulawayo days. The white BMW was sparkling clean and, as I drove into town, Miriam Makeba’s voice sounded sparkling clean, too. Lord, what a beautiful day. I got married on a day like this, fifty years ago in a mud-walled, grass-thatched Tsholotsho church. After the service, my wife and I had taken a stroll in the bush and had consummated our new status as man and wife under a hastily-erected roof of mopane branches, on a bed of wet elephant grass.

How my wife used to love taking a stroll in the drizzle. I miss you,

dear wife, but it's been ages since you've been gone; my period of mourning ends today. I still love you and I guess if you could somehow know what I plan to do today, you'd give me your blessings. Today, I'll meet a teenage girl and we'll drive in the drizzle and afterwards make our own bed of grass, preferably in a decent, quiet hotel room. Maybe we'll lie to each other about love, or we'll just make it a straight cash transaction - I don't really care.

God, what a lovely, clean, happy day, and how beautiful your voice is, Sis Makeba.

I was at the City Hall ten minutes before noon. As I nibbled at a chocolate bar, I thought of Lubalenkosi, 'I'm nineteen and I'm paying', and I pictured her thin cotton dress, her huge laughing eyes, her rabbit's teeth, her long legs, her warm hands on my lap in the screaming darkness of the bus, 'I'll transform you into something young and very, very silly...'.

When the City Hall clock tolled twelve times, I was already waiting under an umbrella, my eyes searching. Grey human shadows scurried this way and that, their heads bowed as if in surrender, the umbrellas floating above them like multi-coloured halos. But there was no Lubalenkosi among them.

Half-past twelve.

Still, I waited. Still, it continued to drizzle. Still, there was no sign of Lubalenkosi.

She won't come. Of course she will, stupid. Maybe she won't come. Maybe she had an accident of some sort and she's in a hospital. No, not her. Why would God be that capricious? She'll come. She has to come. Why should she come? Because she said so, stupid. I think she'll come. Girls like her have no idea of time. Noon means anything to them. Maybe she doesn't even have a watch, she relies on the sun. And since there's no sun today... that's absurd. She will come. She must come. Yes. Perhaps. No.

One o'clock.

And my eyes continued scanning the crowds and the wide streets of Bulawayo. When you're seventy and you're waiting for a teenage date, I suppose any street in the world must seem as eerily vast and forbidding as a clear, limitless desert.

At two, I finally gave up. I hobbled to a bottle-store and bought four Shake-shakes and asked someone to shake and open one for me. The girl at the till looked at me in a peculiar way. Back in my car, I downed the Shake-shake in a few gulps and shook, and opened the next one. After I had downed all four in record time, I drove off towards home, figuring that if drinking and driving can kill, so can waiting forever.

The drizzle had now transmogrified itself into fully-fledged rain. Inwardly, I chided whoever it was Up There for shedding far too many cold tears for this worthless old rich bugger who had been stood up by Lubalenkosi, an equally worthless prostitute. Outside in the rain, a few of her work-mates still stood bravely under umbrellas, their mini-skirts sodden, the make-up peeling down their faces. With both hands on the wheel and the Shake-shakes beginning to cook my brains, I thought I was lucky that there was no police roadblock that day. The speedometer said 160 and I was too drunk, too old and too pissed off to try to bribe a policeman.

Hope

Tawanda Chipato

I am the wounded lion
Roaring, roaring with impotent fury
I am the bull elephant without a herd
Dick forever hanging out in frustration
I am the teenage boy without testicles
The last generation in my gene pool
I am the girl without a womb
Forever banished to the land of the barren
I am the lead singer without a band
Singing acapella to the stars
I am the intellectual without the intellect
A teacher with not one student
I am the African politician without his lies
A reviled African dictator without his motorcade
I am the emaciated, incontinent AIDS patient
Lying in a pool of my own shit
I am the angel of death without his sceptre
Trying and failing to take a single soul
I am the African youth without a future
Dreams shattered beyond repair
I am the Zimbabwean youth with no hope
Face beaten bloody by rampaging government mobs
I am the Harare thug with no purpose
For what is purpose for, where there is no hope?

I'll Fly Away

Farai Mpofu

These are the descendants of Ham
by their clans and languages,
in their territories and nations.

The Sun scorches the land and her children. My heart is pounding and bleeding. A desperate madness lingers in the dark corridors of my mind. I'm scared. Maybe tired. The Sun tightens her red hot noose around my neck. I try to scream, but only blooded phlegm dangles between my dry and cracked lips. I continue my long desperate search for the Grave. The grass among the tombstones, green and succulent, dances to the hymns sung by the wind. I see the tombstones, most of them hideous and gothic looking, yet others have a serene beauty – especially those with effigies of praying white-washed cherubims. The graves are pleading, they each want to tell me their sad tales, but I ignore them. Giggling to myself I rummage through the graveyard in search of the Grave.

‘Ku-chu... ku-chu... ku chu... tshaka, tshaka, tshaka, ku-chu, tshaka, kuchu...’ bellows the shit brown freedom train. That long dirty snake that swallows the hungry workers from the townships and vomits them at the factories. Zombie-like passengers stare into empty space through the grey and greasy windows of that mechanical reptile. They all look like strangers. A young man in a stupor of silence stinks of semen, vaginal fluids and skokian. He did not take the usual cold morning bath in that metal dish – which in actual fact is the reincarnation of an accident wrecked car. The prostitute, of whose vaginal fluids he smells, sits next to him, with her long scruffy-looking plastic human hair extension. She has bright red lipstick on her bruised lips that is reminiscent of those horror movie characters. A look of disbelief grips the young man’s face, he does not want to accept that last night, drunk, he dragged the cyclobe-woman into his

bed. Now he has to go and borrow money from the chimbadzu money-lenders in order to appease her restless spirit for the vagina he bought. The freedom train rattles, towards the city, leaving the tiny, matchbox, township houses, like a man during the last moments of his life. A terrifying battle, between the acidic smells of dirty armpits, halitosis inflicted mouths and a sharp ice-cold breeze from a broken window, takes place. Suddenly there is an ear-piercing screech as the metal wheels of the train brake and slide on the steel rail. A shower of sparks gives a magnificent display on the ribs of the metal reptile. With a jerk the zombie-like passengers fall forward. Another jerk sends them back to their wooden benches. The passengers instinctively rush towards the windows, open them and lean out curiously. Metres away, next to the roaring engine, a battered mixture of bone, clothes, blood and flesh lies still like a huge piece of meat in a butchery.

“It’s a suicide!” grimly says a tall dark man in blue overalls.

The passengers jump onto the granite-stone gravel bedding the railway line. The driver looks down from his window and shakes his head.

“Third one this week,” he says casually. The passengers, by now, have crowded like a swarm of hungry flies around the corpse. Next to that heap of dead flesh is a half empty bottle of Russian Vodka.

“Look at that white stuff,” a voice in the crowd says.

“It’s his brain,” answers another voice, with the conviction of a specialist surgeon.

“How do you know?” asks the first voice.

“Listen, I’ve eaten all kinds of brain at the township shebeens – goat brains, cow brains, sheep brains, pig brains ... I know a brain when I see one.” The first voice drowns into silent embarrassment. A woman next to the voices vomits uncontrollably. Her vomit consists of oil-less vegetables and sadza – no meat particles – she can’t afford meat. A hungry looking mangy dog emerges from the crowd and seizes the opportunity, voraciously eating the vomit. The tall man in dirty blue overalls lets out an energetic kick at the dog and sends it screaming into the air.

A man with a roughly cut moustache moves towards the heap of

bone, clothes, blood and flesh and extracts a metal identification card from what was once a pocket.

“Does anyone know Jacob Mguni?” he asks. No response.

“I said does anyone know Jacob... Mguni?”

“What did you say that boy’s name is?” screams a woman, throwing her vegetable basket onto the ground.

“He is Jacob Mguni, madam.” The statement triggers violent weeping from the woman and she tears her clothes, rolling on the ground. The mangy dog licks at Jacob Mguni’s blood unnoticed. After some time, and a lot of comforting, the woman says Jacob is her neighbour’s young brother.

“He lives down Gwaqaza Road and he was on the wanted list for raping his brother’s daughter. Some say he had an affair with the little child’s mother. The day that boy came to that house, I saw death written in his eyes. Now he is gone. The criminal investigations department has been looking for him,” she says pathetically.

“Where is the brother?” a voice asks.

“He is in South Africa, he works in a restaurant as a chef,” she answers. A fat woman, wearing a kitchen apron, curses and spits at Jacob’s remains.

“May the cunt that gave life to this animal be cursed!” she shouts. “I hope his soul roasts in hell forever!”

The crowd begins to talk freely, the horror and sympathy gradually melts into mockery and jubilation. They laugh and discuss. They laugh. The engine driver looks down, still shaking his head, and says, “Third one in a week.”

The dog is now crunching Jacob’s jaw-bone. No one cares anymore. No one notices the tall, dark man in a pair of dirty blue overalls gulping down the bottle of vodka that was Jacob’s last companion.

That was the story of the Grave. The Grave with no tombstone. The Grave that I have searched for in graveyards for years. The other graves shout “Injustice! injustice! injustice! injustice....”

They want me to listen to their tales as well. But I would be held a

prisoner of the oblivion, of the madness that haunts my soul. They taunt and laugh at me. Their sister the Sun conspires with them. They want me to join them, they want me to die.... I run aimlessly around the graveyard like a mouse taking cover from a hungry eagle. The gravediggers ignore me, they are now used to my antics.

They dig the concrete-hard red earth. I can hear the picks and shovels crunch into the earth. I walk towards the city. The loud hooting of cars and dark fumes welcome me. The tombstones scream and curse behind me.

“Betrayal! Judas Iscariot! Betrayal! Come back and sing lullabies for us, we want to sleep, we are your babies... babies... babies....” They want me to fly away, they know my story. They want me to fly towards the clouds and transform into those clouds. They want me to leave this dark continent, with its hidden demons, and fly away. I may not be man enough to do so today. But I know that one beautiful morning, I shall fly away.

The Baboon

Anne Simone Hutton

This baboon assumes my knowledge – the knowledge
Of our peer-ship and twin mimicry and a soul
Unsnatchable from the same sort of will. There is
Sureness, almost voyeurism, in his stride. His aim
Is never confused. He glides past me like some
Furry urge, determined as the rock from which he's
Sprung, and searches, with a thief's inspiration, for
A gap in the window to steal my bread. As if agreed
Between us, he checks, matily, for my consent.
Would he steal poems?

The Anthill

Gertrude Nyakutse

We had just crossed Simukwe River. Within a few minutes we arrived at what was once my home, the late Jobe Mabuza's homestead. The big smooth rock that stood to the east, towering behind our home, did not intimidate me anymore. In fact, it did not look half the size it was in 1958, when I was eleven years old. Now, it was the year 2003, in the month of July, and I was back. The area looked bare and desolate. A few landmarks had survived the test of time, among them the big smooth rock. There was also the ageless amarula tree, which stood like a lone soldier in front of the two-roomed main house. To the south west was the shallow perennial well with its unusable, muddy, salty water. About fifty metres south of the homestead, standing together, as if united by some mystical force, were the anthill and the ever-green umphafa tree. Otherwise, everything else had changed. It was inevitable.

The year 1958 was a year of change for me. At the end of that year I completed standard four, the highest class at the Bango village school. I had to go back to live with my parents to enrol for standards five and six and then, perhaps, go on to secondary school. At that time girls were not expected to have enough brains to tackle such complicated academic work as was done at secondary school. As it turned out, I did apply to go to secondary school. However, Mr Hlongwane, the head teacher of my new primary school, was so concerned about my father wasting his money paying school fees for a girl, who would never pass the then Rhodesia Junior Certificate, that he braved the scorching October afternoon sun to cycle his squeaky bicycle all the way to our homestead, to advise my father against the wisdom of sending a girl to an academic institution. Understandably, it was not easy for a peasant farmer like my father to raise the required school fees, and so the head teacher's mission to save an old man from what he felt would be a very costly mistake was in good faith.

My leaving Chief Bango's area was a big blow to Auntie Phendla. Having raised me from infancy, I was virtually her daughter and the separation was traumatic for both of us. I must admit though that, over the years, deep down inside of me, I had felt great resentment over the fact that I had been given away as a baby and denied the comfort and love of my own parents. Not that Aunt Phendla did not love me; she did everything within her power as a widow to make my life comfortable. I slept in her hut on a straw mat next to her and, whenever I was sick, she nursed me back to health. As insecure and shaken as I felt by the impending move, I was happy that I would enjoy the comparative wealth and comfort of my parents' home.

My Aunt Phendla was my mother's elder sister. She had three sons, Jobe, Sihlangu and Mthunzini, born in that order. Her daughter, Nomvelo, born between Sihlangu and Mthunzini, had died before her teens and this had sent my auntie into a period of depression. Aunt Phendla was the third child in a family of five children, two boys and three girls. Mazula was the first child, followed by Auntie Thula, whom I never saw, having died before I was born. Then came Auntie Phendla and then Uncle Duma. My mother was the last child. Uncle Duma was very protective of his younger sister. I come from a large family of six boys and six girls. I am the fourth child and the second girl. What has always puzzled me is what my father must have felt when all his first five children, myself included, were given names by his brother-in-law? That was my Uncle Duma. I have very vague memories of him since he died when I was thirteen. I have always felt a mixture of happiness and sadness each time my mother mentions his name. Happiness, because he gave me such a beautiful name, Gertrude. And sadness, because I never got to know him. Apparently he had heard about some queen called Gertrude and felt that was a befitting name for his beloved sister's daughter.

Because my Auntie Phendla had lost her daughter, and since I was the second daughter to my parents, and therefore could be easily spared, tradition dictated that I be given away to my auntie to replace her departed daughter. Not that I ever could. My fate was sealed. I do not know when this transaction took place. The earliest recollections

of my life are from the present Mount Edgecombe area, where we used to live on a farm owned by a white farmer, 'Baas' Broomberg. They are beautiful memories of a traditional African homestead across upper Simukwe River in the Figtree area. I recollect that the place was well watered and I enjoyed going down to the well to fetch water. Sometimes my little cousin would follow me screaming at the top of his voice, hardly visible in the tall grass. He always wanted to go with me wherever I went. And then Auntie Phendla's husband died and we had to relocate because we were of no use to the owner of the farm. My auntie was not able to provide the labour that the farmer needed and Cousin Jobe could not be persuaded to leave his job in the city of Bulawayo to come and provide the required labour on the farm to ensure our continued stay. We, therefore, had no option but to leave, as we had no labour to sell. Until her death years later, my aunt never talked about her life on 'Baas' Broomberg's farm. She had lost too much, all she wanted was to forget the past and continue with her life.

Preparations were made for us to move to some place further south, a place dry and hardly able to support human life. All our belongings were loaded on a donkey cart. Not that there was much, two straw mats, a few blankets, a handful of personal items and kitchen utensils. We also took a cock and two hens, which were secured in an improvised wire and straw basket. During the journey we fed the chickens with whatever leftover food we had. We were on the road for what, to my young mind, seemed like eternity. My Auntie Phendla, Kholu and I sat in the middle of the cart just in front of our belongings. The man who was responsible for our safety and that of the animals sat towards the front and made sure we followed the correct route. We travelled mostly in the mornings and in the afternoons found places where the animals could feed and drink. We cooked whatever food we ate on open fires till we arrived at our destination – Chief Bango's area, across Simukwe River. On our arrival at the place in July 1950, a temporary shelter made of mopane branches was built, next to the mighty rock that still stands defiant and unyielding.

We lived in this shelter for just over a month while the building of

the first hut went on. Preparations for the building started a day after we arrived. Cousin Jobe had already located the anthill from which the soil for building the huts would be dug. Avoiding the core of the anthill, we loosened the soil on one side on which we poured about 30 litres of water each evening. In the morning the loose wet soil was scooped out and transported to the building site. Because of our limited resources, we carried this precious building material on our heads using straw baskets, metal bowls or buckets. Because of my limited strength I carried a much smaller container than my auntie used. This went on for a few days until there was a substantial pile. Then the building began in earnest. The soil from the anthill was mixed with water and kneaded with bare hands into a thick dough-like consistency that was then used to build the walls of the hut. The picture of that first hut, walls growing taller by the day, will live forever in my mind. To be able to get into a building and have the luxury of closing a door is something that most people take for granted. However, to those who have had to do without or spend winter nights in the open and share their food and bedding with wild creatures, some friendly and others deadly, and live to tell the tale, any building is a king's palace. Although it was winter time and snakes were supposed to be hibernating, we had many visits from them. Auntie Phendla advised us to lie still and pretend we were dead, so that the visitors would slither away thinking we were part of the big rock, that is if snakes are capable of thinking. Anyway we were able to survive, the worst being stings from scorpions. I cannot recall the number of times I danced all over the enclosure because of a poisonous jab from that creature's raised tail. Up to today I have great respect for the scorpion and will stay clear of them at all cost. We moved into the hut even before it was completed.

The most vivid recollections of my childhood were with Auntie Phendla. I loved my aunt but I also felt great resentment towards my parents and my siblings. I felt I was a castaway, deprived of the luxury that my siblings enjoyed. They slept on beds and rode bicycles to school, while I slept on rough straw mats that bruised my body and left it sore. I did not even have the cheapest pair of canvas shoes to

protect my feet from the cold winters. Consequently the soles of my feet were cracked and calloused from beating the bare earth. In fact, I had scales like the young of a crocodile and each time I visited my parents I was an object of laughter and ridicule. It hurt so badly. I wet my bed till I was almost ten. I did not know why this was happening to me then, but looking back with the understanding that I have now, perhaps it was a sense of insecurity. My loyalties still lie with Aunt Phendla's grandchildren. I feel that is where I belong and yet to them I must be a nuisance, an interfering outsider. Meanwhile my siblings want me to take responsibilities in what I regard as their family. I have never felt that I belong to that family. Most of the time I feel alone, torn apart by divided confusing loyalties. There is much that is good about our African traditions, but I also wonder how much damage has been done to peoples' lives by the culture that denies one his or her rights in the interest of the group.

Aunt Phendla's homestead continued to be my home for a long time. Our little round kitchen had a fireplace in the centre and many a time I would go and look for firewood to feed it. Other chores included fetching water from Simukwe River, about four kilometres away, pounding sorghum and millet, as well as cooking our meals. There were three of us, my aunt, Cousin Kholu and myself. Kholu was Uncle Duma's son. He too was given away to Aunt Phendla to raise. Kholu was a twin. Born first and stronger than his twin brother, he was certified fit to survive without his mother's breast milk, and so he was whisked away to be brought up by Auntie Phendla. Three years younger than I was, Kholu was my life, my other half; life without him was meaningless. He filled the emptiness left by the siblings that I had been denied intimate knowledge of and, in my deprived environment, gave me a sense of direction and a reason to live. I tried to carry him on my back and many times we fell and cried together, only to try again. Try as much as I did, I never could lift him. That wish was never fulfilled. Even then I tried to mother him as much as I could and in what way I knew how.

Today is a long way from 1950. The big rock still stands unchanged,

but the bushes that Kholu and I used as bush toilets are gone. I go up the rock the way we used to and it seems so easy. I can see kilometres away. The trees and bushes that used to scare the life out of us are gone, having fallen to both man's greed and devastating droughts. Old homesteads are gone and new ones have come up, a sign of renewal perhaps or the last kicks of a dying horse.

Yesterday was Themba's funeral. Themba was Cousin Jobe's son. He was 35 years old and had died in South Africa where he was working. They say he died from 'that disease'. He left a sick wife and four children, two of whom have been living with his frail mother in the parched Bango area of Matabeleland. The funeral party left Johannesburg at 12 noon the day before and did not arrive in Bulawayo till 9 a.m. the following day. After a brief stop-over in Nketa 5 township, at Themba's brother's house, for tea and to stretch their legs, the weary mourners, most of them with hoarse voices from singing all night, continued the journey to his rural home for burial. Twice during the journey to Themba's final resting place, the accompanying priest and priestess, in their purple and white attire and priestly head-dresses, stopped the minibus pulling the little cart with the coffin. They asked everyone to alight and stand round the coffin, plucked a small branch from the nearest tree and placed it on the coffin and then led the mourners in singing and prayers for the soul of the deceased. They pleaded with the Almighty for protection on the rough road.

Whereas the Bulawayo to Maphisa stretch of the road was relatively smooth, the Maphisa to Simukwe River section was a different story. This gravel road had not been graded since Matabeleland's nationalist hero, Joshua Nkomo, died. Perhaps there was no need for anyone to go that way again. The road must die too. The mourners lifted their voices in unison as the vehicle swung from one side of the road to the other, searching for a respectful and polite way to ferry the departed to his final resting place. It was as if the condition of the road was to emphasise the pain that both the vehicle and the passengers were experiencing. Indeed the brakes of the little bus squeaked and the engine spluttered and growled as if in pain,

while the passengers were jolted and knocked about in their seats.

At three o'clock, we finally crossed Simukwe River. There was no river to talk about, just a pile of sand. There seemed so much of it; the river of my childhood was no more. I did not recognize the place. There were a few thorny bushes scattered here and there. The road itself was a sand track; like everything else in this part of my country, it was dying.

Five minutes later, we arrived at the late Jobe's homestead. The coffin with Themba's body was taken inside and placed on a table. A mattress had been placed on a traditional straw mat in the corner of the room. Themba's mother, MaNkala to the villagers and relatives, sat on this soft mattress. She was surrounded by relatives and friends, and yet she was alone in her thick inner pain and grief. The relatives were weeping and some very loudly. I too wept. But MaNkala's eyes were dry. She had a glazed look about her, staring straight in front of her as if she was not part of what was happening. She had no more tears to shed. How many times had she sat in that corner of the room? First, it was her mother-in-law, then her husband, then her daughter and now her son. "Is it possible for one to refuse to go through all this?" she seemed to wonder silently to herself, lost in her own world of numbness. "Well perhaps it is. I will refuse to cry, they can all shed tears, if they want to, but not me. No one will see my tears today. Enough is enough." And so she sat with her legs stretched in front of her, her body hunched forward and her right elbow resting on her lap and the palm supporting her chin. She was alone amidst many.

The grave had already been dug at the anthill in line with the three others, Aunt Phendla's, Cousin Jobe's and MaNkala's daughter Vuyiso's. Today, Themba would join them. The rituals were completed and, at the conclusion of the burial, a branch of the thorny umphafa tree was hacked down and laid on the fresh grave. This had been done with all the other burials. It was meant to stop wild animals from digging up the dead. But in 2003 there were no wild animals. They could not survive in this desolate environment. Even stray dogs had long ago died from starvation. Only the bare big rock stood defiant. The umphafa tree, with its hooked thorns, would also survive

because nobody touched it. It was treated with respect and awe. Its function was to protect the dead and as long as there were people still dying, it had reason to survive.

I looked at the anthill. It had provided us with the soil we needed to build our home when we first came to this place, now it was swallowing us one by one. Is it protecting the remains of those I love, I wondered?

Contributors

Wim Boswinkel (2084) was born in 1947. He left Holland straight after school to become involved in farming and tourism in South America and Africa. He has lived in Bulawayo since 1988. His novel *Erina* was published by 'amaBooks in 2003.

Catherine Buckle (*Full Circle*) was born and educated in Zimbabwe, graduating from the School of Social Work in 1978. She has six books in print, four fiction and two non-fiction, and wrote a regular column for the Daily News until its closure in 2003. She is a single mother of a 12 year old boy and lives in Marondera.

Tawanda Chipato (*Past State House* and *Hope*) is one of six children. The family home is in Paddenhurst, Bulawayo. He attended Milton School and now feels he is getting too old at twenty something. He is an insurance underwriter and claims processor, and the greatest couch sportsperson who ever lived. His ambition is to write the great African novel.

Mathew Chokuwenga (*The Girl with the Stolen Virginity* and *The Photo*), aged 30, owns and runs a clothing shop. As well as writing, he paints, sculpts and plays music. He won an award for English Literature in the UNDP Artists against Poverty Competition, has exhibited at the Delta and Verandah Galleries and is working on a musical CD.

Bhekilizwe Dube (*The Seekers*), aged 26, works as a literature teacher. He studied literature, linguistics, Spanish and theatre arts at the University of Zimbabwe for two years. He has worked as a playwright, poet, dancer and actor with Sofika Performing Arts and as an arts administrator for the School of African Awareness in Bulawayo.

John Eppel (*My Dustbin* and *Rosewater*) was born in South Africa in 1947 and grew up in Zimbabwe. He teaches English at Christian Brothers College in Bulawayo. His first novel, *D.G.G. Berry's The Great North Road*, won the M-Net Prize in South Africa. His second novel, *Hatchings*, was short-listed for the M-Net Prize and was chosen for the series in the *Times Literary Supplement* on the most significant books to have come out of Africa. His first book of poems, *Spoils of War*, won the Ingrid Jonker Prize. His other novels, *The Giraffe Man*, *The Curse of the Ripe Tomato* and *The Holy Innocents*, and his poetry anthologies, *Sonata for Matabeleland* and *Selected Poems: 1965-1995*, have received critical acclaim. His most recent publication is *The Caruso of Colleen Bawn and Other Short Writings*.

Derek Huggins (*Crossing the Divide*) emigrated to Southern Rhodesia in 1959 at the age of eighteen to join the B.S.A. Police. He rode horse patrols in Matabeleland and later became a detective with the Criminal Investigation Department. In 1974 he opened Gallery Delta for the promotion of contemporary painting. Concurrently, he was the Chief Executive of the National Arts Foundation from 1975 to 1988. Weaver Press has recently published his collection of stories, *Stained Earth*.

Anne Simone Hutton (*The Baboon*), originally from Germany, came to Zimbabwe in 1990. Between 1994 and 2002 she had a studio at the National Gallery in Bulawayo from where she painted for her annual exhibitions. The vitality of Africa and her special love for Bulawayo gave her inspiration to paint and write. She now lives in New Zealand with her husband and son.

Mthandazo Mahlangu-Mhlanga (*My Hood*) was born in Bulawayo in 1971. Following in the footsteps of her parents and her grandfather, she trained as a teacher and is now an English teacher at Milton High School. She is a mother of three and lives in the township of Emganwini. Encouraged by her playwright husband Styx Mhlanga, she has produced her first short story for this collection.

Judy Maposa (*Bathing with Tadpoles*) was born in Bulawayo in 1972, and at an early age would lose herself in a world of words and imagination in the Tshabalala library. The eldest child of a family of seven she lived for some time in the early 80's in her rural Gwanda home, which nurtured a deep love for the open spaces and rocky heights of natural Zimbabwe. After leaving Mzilikazi High School with her 'A' levels, she found her working world of words at *The Chronicle* and *Sunday News*. She is now the quality controller for the *Sunday News*, with her studies focused on Communication and Marketing as a UNISA student.

Deon Marcus (*Our 'Notre Dame'*) was born in Bulawayo in 1978 and educated at Milton Junior School and Christian Brothers College. He also studied piano and viola at the Zimbabwe Academy of Music and is currently a member of the Bulawayo Philharmonic Orchestra. He holds an Honours Degree in Accounting Science from the University of South Africa, and is currently in his second year of a Bachelor of Arts degree in classical studies.

Christopher Mlalazi (*It's His Who Wakes the Hare* and *My Meat!*) was born in 1970 in the Plumtree district, but brought up in Bulawayo. His play, *Soil of the Son*, has been staged successfully at a number of venues and two of his plays are under rehearsal with Umkhathi Theatre and Sadalala Amajekete Theatre. He has had several poems and short stories published. He is a student of creative writing with the Crossing Borders project, sponsored by the British Council.

Bekezela Mlilo (*Two Fat*) was born in Zambia in 1981, but now lives and paints in Bulawayo. His work has been featured in several exhibitions in Bulawayo and Harare, including the solo exhibition *Inner Child* at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo. He won an award for graphics at the Mbira Art exhibition in 2001 and was nominated for a NAMA award in 2004.

Farai Mpofu (*Whirlwinds* and *I'll Fly Away*) was born in 1980 in Bulawayo, a first born child in a family of five. He grew up in the townships of Bulawayo, where he still lives. He attended school at Cyrene Mission and later went to the University of Zimbabwe, from where he graduated with an honours degree in theatre arts. Today he is a theatre artist, literature in English tutor and business entrepreneur. He is currently working on his first collection of short stories, *The Refrigerator is Empty*. In the near future he intends to study for a masters degree in media production.

Mzana Mthimkhulu (*Everything is Gonna Be All Right*) was born in 1954 at Mpilo Hospital. He has lived in Bulawayo for most of his life and is currently a human resources practitioner. His short stories and social commentaries have appeared in several newspapers and magazines in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Mzana is married and has three children.

Tinashe Mushakavanhu (*City Insomnia* and *Amainini Wendy*) was born in Harare, moving to Gweru with his family in 1999. He attended Msengezi and Fletcher High schools, and is currently an English major at the Midlands State University. He is a participant in the Crossing Borders Creative Writing project, a mentoring scheme supported by the British Council. Many of his poems have been published, one winning the Sunday Mail poetry competition. He also contributes to several newspapers and magazines. Tinashe is an intern publishing assistant at Weaver Press, an experience that has charted the beginning of his journey in the real world of books.

Gertrude Nyakutse (*The Anthill*) was born in Kezi district and has been a high school English teacher, as well as a college and university lecturer. She spent nine years teaching in Northern Nigeria, and has also worked for the Bulawayo Legal Project Centre as administrator and for the Contact Family Counselling Centre as co-ordinator. Presently, Gertrude is Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Swaziland. *The Anthill* is her first story.

Pathisa Nyathi (*Illuminating Flames*) was born in Sankonjana, Kezi. He was a teacher, lecturer and head teacher before becoming an Education Officer in 1996. Currently he is the Deputy Provincial Education Director for Matabeleland North. He is a published poet, playwright, historian and biographer; his most recent publications being *In Search of Freedom: Masotsha Ndlovu*, *Material Culture of the AmaNdebele*, *Izibongo Lezangelo ZamaNdebele kaMzilikazi*, *Alvord Mabena: the Man and his Roots* and *Traditional Ceremonies of the AmaNdebele*. He is a columnist for the *Sunday News*, *Umthunywa*, *The Sunday Mirror* and *Sky Host*. He is Vice Chair of the Zimbabwe Academic and Non-Fiction Authors Association and a Board Member for a number of organizations.

John Simcoe Read (*The Messenger's Finger*) was born in Harare in the last century, but has lived in Bulawayo since the beginning of this century. Born the eldest son to a seafarer, sheep herder, civil servant, gold miner, mica miner, mixed farmer and rancher and to a hockey test player from Eveline High School. He had difficulty choosing a career after Prince Edward High School and Natal University. Eventually he chose to study molecules that modify animal behaviour, arriving at NUST as Professor of Applied Biology and Biochemistry. He is currently enjoying the role of acting Pro-Vice Chancellor and the challenge of modifying human behaviour by committee.

Bryony Rheam (*Something about Tea*) was born in Kadoma in 1974. She went to school in Bulawayo, before moving to the UK where she obtained a BA and MA in English. Despite not living in Bulawayo for over ten years, she still feels a strong allegiance to it and to Matabeleland in general. She was Head of English at Peterhouse, but is presently teaching part-time until the birth of her baby.

Godfrey M. Sibanda (*The Coming* and *One for the Road*) was born in Bulawayo in 1969. Most of his formative years were spent in Bulawayo and he completed his education at the University of Zimbabwe and the University Complutense de Madrid. He taught mathematics in several schools before becoming a Spanish/English translator/interpreter and tourist guide in Victoria Falls.

Addelis Sibutha (*Between Two Men*) comes from Hwange. On completion of a teacher training course at the United College of Education in Bulawayo, she taught in Hwange and Bulawayo. She also studied for a Graduate Diploma in Marketing. After working as Visual Arts Development Outreach Officer at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo from 1998 to 2002, she returned as Regional Director in 2003. She was one of eight Zimbabweans chosen to participate in the British Council Central Africa Leadership Programme in 2003 and is presently completing an MBA with the Zimbabwe Open University.

Short Writings from Bulawayo II is a collection of short stories and poems that take the reader on a journey through the townships of Bulawayo, to the rural areas and beyond. It would be unforgivable in today's Zimbabwe to publish an anthology that did not reflect the struggles of the people to survive poverty and oppression and the way that cultural expectations impact on their daily lives. As well as pathos, there is often humour in the closely observed portrayals of township denizens. Memories of an earlier rural life paint a very different picture to that of contemporary city life. A common theme in the pieces is the singular fortitude of Zimbabweans in the face of adversity.

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